

Preface

WHY IS IT THAT, despite the wealth and the freedom now enjoyed by most citizens of rich countries, we do not appear to be the autonomous, fulfilled individuals we were told our wealth and freedom would bring? This book attempts to answer this question: it does so by focusing on the personal rather than the political. Of course, the individual is always conditioned by powerful social forces, but when those influences are stripped away we are left with just an individual and a conscience.

I begin by arguing that the opportunities created by the great popular movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are now being sacrificed to a new form of coercion, one unleashed by the very forces of social and economic liberalism that promised to set us free. This newly exposed form of ‘unfreedom’ is unusual because it is not imposed from without: everywhere the citizens of affluent countries collaborate in their own subordination. My first aim is to explain why this is so. If we truly want fulfilled and purposeful lives, why do we settle for a life of consumer conformity marked by the pursuit of substitute gratifications such as wealth, the perfect body, celebrity and status? To find the answer we must consider not just the social and cultural forces that seduce us but also the deeper question of what to do with a life.

Oppressive laws and social structures have been overthrown by movements ranged against entrenched elites, but the forces that deprive us of our ‘inner freedom’ are harder to identify. In an age of over-consumption, intemperance and moral confusion, the structures that prevent us from

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flourishing have lodged themselves in our psyches. The source for the kind of transformation that is now needed lies beyond the cultural, political and social philosophies that have formed the bedrock of progressive thought. We need to look to metaphysics—ideas about knowing and being that are beyond the psychological and social structures that condition everyday experience—to discover what unites us all in our humanity.

Part Two of the book sets out a metaphysical argument that provides the basis for understanding the cause of this new form of unfreedom. It also explores some of the big questions of meaning that challenge modern humankind: What should we make of a life? How should we think about death? Has rationality become an obstacle to further progress? Does the death of God consign us to a life of superficiality?

In rethinking my own position while writing this book, I found I had to discard many of my old beliefs and embrace some I could not have expected. Readers might be asked to make a similar, possibly uncomfortable, journey. I hope to show by the end that, in contrast with the prevailing view that being free means being able to do what we please, we cannot be truly free without committing ourselves to a moral life.

This might seem a paradox, but in fact being free and being moral are inseparable. Being free entails imposing constraints on ourselves; in turn, those constraints provide us with our sense of self. The philosopher Harry Frankfurt argues that we identify with what we care about. Our values and the things we love impose obligations on us. And if we fail to live up to our values we betray ourselves. A moral free-for-all, therefore, cannot allow us to express who we are; it is the constraints we impose on our choices that solidify our sense of self. Greater choice, coupled with a lack of self-control, lead to a disintegration of identity. People who have difficulty locating, articulating and adhering to their values thus have a weaker sense of who they are. This is why questions of meaning and morality cannot be divorced.

The metaphysical and ethical arguments I put forward in this book owe most to the work of German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, who saw himself building on and correcting the revolutionary system of ‘transcendental idealism’ developed by Immanuel Kant. It was Kant who had the blinding insight that a free will and a will under moral law are one and the same, although he was anticipated by a French philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who wrote that ‘the mere impulse of appetite is slavery, while obedience to a law which we prescribe to ourselves is liberty’.

In Parts Three and Four I develop and apply a moral philosophy based on the metaphysics of Part Two. Our world is one of moral relativism, and

the idea of a moral philosophy and the ethical injunctions that flow from it make many people feel nervous. They fear that by stating their own moral standpoint too strongly they will be devaluing the standpoint of others. This is the laudable sentiment behind post-modern ethical thinking, but it has reduced morality to ‘just what I think’. To be persuasive, and to avoid the trap of moral chauvinism, a moral philosophy must grow from something that is common to humanity rather than distinctive to particular communities or cultures. For this reason it must be based on metaphysics—an understanding that goes beneath or beyond the particularities of social and personal experience.

The ancient Greek mathematician Archimedes wrote, ‘Give me one fixed point and I will move the Earth’. If we can find a fixed point, it will allow a moral philosophy to be nailed down, and moral relativism vanishes. I argue that there is such a locus, a metaphysical absolute that is the basis for all important moral judgments. After consideration of the alternatives, I adopted the term ‘noumenon’ (usually pronounced ‘*noomenon*’) to describe its source. Kant uses this word for his concept of the ‘thing-in-itself’, which can be thought of as the world as it is, in its pure existence, before we bring our forms of understanding to it. The noumenon is always discussed as a partner of the concept of the ‘phenomenon’, the world of everyday appearances. As this suggests, the distinction is really about how we experience and understand the world.

Although fundamental to the work of Kant and Schopenhauer, the distinction between noumenon and phenomenon is more a characteristic of Eastern philosophies, in which the idea of the noumenon is captured in terms such as ‘universal essence’ and ‘subtle essence’. Throughout the book I note some parallels between my argument and those from Eastern traditions, where it has long been understood that the noumenon can be known (if at all) only by transcending the everyday forms of understanding.

Although the noumenon is usually thought of as a characteristic of the world ‘out there’, I take up Schopenhauer’s most original insight (which he subsequently recognised in the classics of Hinduism) that the noumenon must also be found within us. In developing my moral philosophy, I call this fixed point within us ‘the moral self’. Establishing a fixed moral point allows me to develop an ethical position that repudiates moral relativism but avoids all theology—in other words, a post-secular ethics. In Part Five I conclude by arguing that the modern problem of freedom can be resolved only if we recognise and live according to our moral self. Despite being personal in its orientation, my book takes freedom and

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morality as its themes and is thus political in its implications, although these implications are not spelt out here.

I hope this brief overview makes it clear to the reader that, byways and digressions aside, a coherent argument runs through the book. The entire thesis hangs on a single insight, the simple but profound realisation, common to so much philosophy and religious thought, that each of us is united with all things, an idea expressed most purely in the words of the Hindu classics—thou art that.