Issues in Teaching Contemporary Ethics

A Review Article

ANTONY FLEW

University of Reading

The series "Issues in Contemporary Ethics" is a lively and worthwhile enterprise. The books—all in paperback—are published by the Schenkman Company, which for its own reasons makes a point of telling us on its letterheads that it is a subsidiary of General Electric. The general editor is Peter A. French of the University of Minnesota. He edited the first volume himself, and it appeared as a model well before any of the others. This itself is a good example for other series and series editors to follow.

This sample and standard is *Individual and Collective Responsibility: the Massacre at My Lai*[1]. It consists in a short preface, eight essays by eight different philosophers including the editor, an appendix of related documents, and a bibliography. This volume is illustrated, but not its successors. Jane Sterrett does an appropriately sinister job. Two of these successors were available at the time of writing: *The Manson Murders: a Philosophical Inquiry*[2], edited by David E. Cooper of the University of London Institute of Education, and *Conscientious Actions: the Revelation of the Pentagon Papers*[3], edited by the general editor. Four more titles were announced at the beginning: *Punishment; Attica; Utopia/ Dystopia; Assassination;* and *Abortion.* The first of these four titles has since been changed to *Punishment and Human Rights.* It would spare the surviving classically-educated pain if someone had last-minute second thoughts about the second also. Certainly "dyspepsia" and "dysgenic" are the well-formed opposites of "eupepsia" and "eugenic". But the word is not "Eutopia"; it is "Utopia", and its etymology refers not to paradise but to no place. William Morris, though no equal to Sir Thomas More as a Greek scholar, got the allusion to the original *Utopia* right when he entitled his own work *News from Nowhere.*

The present series is bound to interest those concerned to teach moral and political philosophy; as I am sure the sales representatives of the Schenkman Company have been saying, and will continue to say. It is, therefore, both curious and significant that the general editor says nothing about teaching in any of his three prefaces. Thus in the first he writes: "First and foremost this is a philosophy series, designed to help us in some comprehensible way with the sometimes overwhelming, always serious, issues of the day. The major example used in this volume, the massacre at My Lai, is to be thought of as the occasion for raising and investigating the moral and legal questions of individual and collective responsibility ... the philosophers ... are examining the grounds for holding various notions of responsibility and the application of such notions to the atrocity that was My Lai. In brief the aim of this book, and of the series as a whole, is to produce exciting new philosophical contributions to the major ethical controversies of the day" (p.vii).

This is all, I think, as far as it goes, excellent. The pages of *Philosophy and Public Affairs,* and of some other journals some of the time, show that it is possible "to produce exciting new philosophical contributions to the major" first-order moral and political "controversies of the day"; and, although the concern

among professional philosophers to make this sort of contribution has grown greatly in recent years, we could certainly do with a lot more still.

But there is another much bigger, more widespread, and perhaps both more neglected and more important responsibility. Not every professional philosopher can reasonably either hope or be expected "to produce exciting new philosophical contributions", either here or indeed anywhere else. But what as teachers of philosophy we all can and should be doing is exciting others with what will often be old as well as true, but new to them. And, furthermore, this teaching function is especially important in these more practical areas of our discipline. We need always to see, and sometimes to say, what was for both Plato and Aristotle a commonplace: that moral philosophy can be relevant to moral conduct; and that its justification lies at least in part in that relevance. For good moral philosophy can and should be set to work to improve first-order moral thinking, and—granted always that the thinkers are sincerely concerned to act well—better moral thinking must tend to produce better conduct. If anyone responds to these unfashionable and embarrassing remarks by asking, "Do you want teachers of philosophy to become do-gooders?", I can best reply with another rhetorical question, "Do you want us to do no good at all?"

How then might the volumes in the present series have been different had French and the rest been primarily concerned to produce teaching material rather than "exciting new philosophical contributions"? The first thing, I suggest, is that the editing would have had to be stronger and more intrusive. French says in the first volume: "The contributors did not have access to each other's articles but have independently developed their views on the issue". He goes on to congratulate himself on the happy event: "There is amazingly little repetition, testifying to the breadth and perhaps also to the importance of the issues" (p.vii). He has indeed been fortunate. There is in this volume very little repetition, although a repetition of fundamentals in diffent styles would not in any case be a fault in teaching. More important, his contributors seem in this first case to have insisted among them on all the really vital distinctions. Nevertheless, to adopt this procedure of uncoordinated and unsupplemented solicitation as a regular method of compilation is to push your luck. At the very least the volume editors ought to reserve, and be ready to use, the right to plug any major gaps which happen to have been left between the free-ranging essays of their contributors.

Second, if students are to be led into rather more conventionally academic moral philosophy from such discussion of urgent first-order issues, then bridges to the mainstream material thus made interesting and relevant need to be established. In *Conscientious Actions* this is done after a fashion. For its appendix consists in extracts from Hobbes, Locke, Butler, Thoreau and Thomas Fowler. In so far as the aim remains "to produce exciting new philosophical contributions" this appendix is out of place: Hobbes, for instance, though unfailingly exciting is scarcely new. If the aim now is to introduce people to moral philosophy, and to show how its ancient and modern classics can be relevant to contemporary first-order issues, then the contributors need to be told, and perhaps consulted about, the contents of the proposed appendix. They could even be asked to try to make some connection between their own contributions and that appendix.

Third, some provision must be made to ensure that the student does make and does know that he is making progress. It is in the nature of philosophy as an essentially argumentative activity that the arguments may seem to get nowhere.

(Often they do in fact get nowhere!) So some professionals, paid to know better, make so bold as to glory in the suggestion that there can be no established conclusions and hence no progress in philosophy. If this were right, then doing philosophy would be irredeemably frivolous—a sort of intellectual masturbation; while teaching it would be inevitably demoralizing. In fact it often is. But our teaching would then necessarily involve, in the words of the accusers of Socrates, if not "introducing strange gods", at any rate "corrupting the youth". As it is we do not have to do this. We have not to.

The other—unprogressive—view of our discipline is, though common, wrong. Certainly, as in science too, we have always to allow the theoretical possibility that any conclusion may in the light of a new good reason given have to be revised or even rejected. But to say this in philosophy, as we say it in science, is not to say that there can be no progress. Notwithstanding that—fortunately for us—there will never be a time when philosophical inquiry has to stop because the work is complete, one can certainly say that to have recognized that this distinction is crucial, or that that seductive argument is fallacious, constitutes progress. Wittgenstein offers a helpful analogy in *The Blue Book*. Suppose we have to sort a pile of books lying higgledy-piggledy on the floor. Then we shall have made some progress when we have got the two volumes of Ryle's *Collected Papers* together on the nearest shelf, even though they are not where in the end they ought to be.

Many students are all too apt to think that philosophy, or at any rate they, are getting nowhere. If they are not to think this and—even more important!—if it is not to be true, we have to keep making reviews, and to keep getting them to make reviews, of the progress actually made. For the editor of any book in the present series to do this reviewing in the book itself might well be faulted as spoon-feeding. Yet nearly all readers do nevertheless need someone to tell them to do it for themselves. So if these are to be teaching books the editors might well be the first to tell their readers to get on with it.

Fourth, French claims in his preface to the first volume: "An attempt has been made to assure [*sic*] that the contributors represent divergent moral points of view" (p.vii). This is obviously important in all such legitimately controversial areas. It is only in so far as—following the words if not the deeds of Chairman Mao—we "Let a hundred flowers bloom, let many schools contend" that we can hope to ensure that all the various assumptions and alternatives which ought to be discerned and examined are. Suppose for once we glance beyond our own little cloister: we can see that one of the causes of the present lamentable condition of British sociology is that almost all our sociologists are more or less extreme socialists. Left-wing nonsense thus flourishes unblasted by those fierce winds of criticism which so rightly sweep over what little right-wing nonsense shyly dares to surface on the red Essex heath.

It is, therefore, to be regretted that in two books which refer so often to the Vietnam war no voices should be heard except those of what the late Vice-President Agnew used in his days of glory to call "the Radical-Liberal establishment". For instance: two contributors to *Conscientious Actions* mention "the domino theory". Berel Lang gives a cool account of its history, as revealed by the *Pentagon Papers* (pp.113 ff.). Peter Fuss is more excited: "While the cry of global communist conspiracy is sometimes admittedly a wolf-cry on the part of the problem-solvers (in order to get more Congressional appropriations to appease the Pentagon, a freer hand to conduct foreign policy), their long-awaited emancipation from compulsive adherence to such doctrines as the domino theory is far from

evident" (pp.90-91). What I miss here is any awareness that a theory, and perhaps particularly an uncomfortable theory, is to be rejected only on the basis of evidence that it is not true; (to say nothing of any awareness that the USA may really need defenses).

Again, Berel Lang writes: "The War itself is an enormity from which the conscience of the citizens of the United States cannot be freed even with its end: 50,000 American dead; upwards of 1,500,000 Vietnamese—South, North, and Middle—dead" (p.111). No doubt. But a philosopher above all should remember that it takes at least two parties to continue a war. The same enormous costs were by that same token also the costs of the inflexible determination of the Central Committee of the Vietnamese Communist Party to extend their rule over all Vietnam, and that of their protégés over Laos and Cambodia. It is the more necessary for teachers to contribute a bit of balance here since none will be found at this time among our students. Some of French's second team reminded me sometimes of Marx: "You are not the doctors. You are the disease!".

Suppose finally that we inspect these three volumes one by one. The first which was, presumably, put forward as the model is fittingly the best. It deals faithfully with all those fashionable evasions which, by prating that we are all (equally?) responsible for everything, release everyone from any real and uneasy responsibility for anything. Certainly the first job of any such book, admirably fulfilled by this one, is to insist that we must always break down any claims about collective responsibility into claims about exactly what was done or not done by whom, and exactly what is in each case the due credit or discredit due (e.g. pp.20-22, pp.83 ff. and pp.103 ff.). It is also salutary to mention some of those who did in fact refuse to participate in atrocities (e.g., pp.30 and 158). For this shows that these atrocities could have been helped, and thus helps a little to discourage their repetition. The Appendix consists in the Ridenhour letter reporting the outrage, and various legal documents from Nuremberg and elsewhere. The editorial blue pencil should have scored out Haskell Fain's lapse of taste: "six million pop off to the gas chamber" (p.25).

The crucial distinctions about *Conscientious Actions* do not come out so well. The fuzziness of mind which allows John Llewelyn simply to identify "what Collingwood calls 'absolute presuppositions'" with "what Wittgenstein calls 'forms of life'" (p.106) also afflicts other contributors, albeit to a less scandalous extent. I wish that French had followed a precedent set in his first volume by including a reprint—Ryle's 'Conscience and Moral Conviction'.

The best thing we do have is D.O.Thomas on 'Subjective Justification'. But for most students the fundamental distinction between what I believe I ought to do (his "subjective justification") and what really ought to be done (his "objective justification") is likely to get buried under his further distinction between "private" and "ultimate justification". Nor will they acquire a tight grasp on his best insight: "A man could hardly be said to be sincere in his beliefs if he did nothing to ensure that his judgement was reasonably well-informed and well-advised" (p.62).

It is impossible to exaggerate the pedagogic importance of communicating this insight into a necessary connection between sincerity and rationality—especially to a generation inclined to oppose the former to the latter. A person can, for instance, be said to be supporting a party or a program out of a sincere concern for the welfare of the workers, or whatever else, only and precisely in so far as he takes steps to monitor the success of that party or that program in actually

achieving those stated aims, and only and precisely in so far as he is ready to modify or to abandon either or both when they are found to be failing to fulfil their original promise. A bigoted and incorrigible commitment to any program must be construed as evidence that its appeal to you either never was what you said it was, or was but has since become something else. What was originally a means to other ends has perhaps become itself the supreme end. Or maybe the real end always has been other than the stated end[4].

In his Preface to *The Manson Murders* French asserts as if it were plumb obvious one of those too popular propositions which it is part of the proper business of philosophy teaching to analyze and to challenge: "In many ways these young people simply inculcated [*sic*] our society's actual, as opposed to proclaimed, values to the extreme" (p.viii). Confronted by such unwarranted and unbelievable national breast-beating what can I as a friendly foreigner say but that the values realized by the Manson family were simply not the actual values of any of my own extensive American acquaintance? Despite all the violent crime and cruelty, your society is not as bad as that all through!

There are in this third book many other expressions of what is, I hope, a passing national mood of frenetic self-reproach. But its most serious weakness is in the handling of the key notion of mental disease. The appendix mixes materials from the Manson trial with the texts of the McNaghten, Durham, and Carter rules. But no one even begins to develop and to examine the analogy between physical and mental disease. Yet it is only because they have—reasonably—construed mental disease as in crucial respects similar to physical disease, and hence as necessarily to some extent incapacitating, that the lawyers have been prepared to allow that people cannot be criminally responsible for behaviour which is the product of mental disease. It is also only on the basis of this presumed close analogy between mental and physical disease that we can allow the claim of psychiatrists to be a sort of doctor, rather than a kind of priest.[5]

Once these neglected truisms have been appreciated we can begin right by asking the correct question. If Manson or any of his "family" are to be excused on grounds of mental disease, then it has surely got to be shown that they are—or were—in a condition closely similar to a physical disease; and in particular that this condition was relevantly incapacitating. It is neither necessary nor sufficient to show that they were–as no doubt they were–abnormal, anti-social, dangerous, and in every other way quite different from us. The home life of the Manson "family" was, as the old tag has it, "so unlike the home life of our dear Queen". That's for sure!

Corrigenda

Apart from the two malapropisms and the lapse of taste noted above, a note at p.212 of *ICR* confuses the late H.B.Acton as Editor of *Philosophy* with the historian Lord Acton, and at p.103 Virginia Held exaggerates the not less than 107 killings of the Calley indictment into that of "several hundred unarmed and unresisting persons". At p.5 of *CA* "Ashley" is misspelt. At p.19 of *MM* the meaning of the word "retrodict" is incorrectly explained. At p.79 for "incapable of preventing himself from conforming to the law" we should read "incapable of preventing himself from violating the law".

Incidentally, though this is scarcely an ordinary corrigendum, while Nathaniel Brandon may well be guilty on all counts, the particular passages cited by R.C. Scharff on p.20 do not prove his point.

1. Pp. viii + 207. Cambridge, Mass: Schenkman, 1972. Library of Congress No. 72-81522.
2. Pp. viii + 141. Cambridge, Mass: Schenkman, 1974. Library of Congress No. 73-78199.
3. Pp. viii + 176. Cambridge, Mass: Schenkman, 1974. Library of Congress No. 73-82378.
4. British readers will here recall the incorrigible though sometimes half-concealed and half-denied commitment of their Labour Party to the state ownership of "all the means of production, distribution and exchange". For, whatever the advantages to the employees of a nationalized industry of having an employer with a license to print money to meet their every wage claim, experience has made it almost impossible for anyone to go on maintaining that in Britain wholesale nationalization is in the public interest. For the marxists in the Labour Party, and in the labor unions which control and finance that party, the real aim is presumably the one suggested in a recent statement from the Institute of Marxism-Leninism in Moscow: "Having one acquired political power the working class implements the liquidation of the private ownership of the means of production.... As a result, under socialism, there remains no ground for the existence of any opposition parties counterbalancing the Communist Party" (See *The Economist* (London) for 17/VI/72, p.23).
5. I may perhaps refer to my *Crime or Disease?* (London and New York: Macmillan and Barnes and Noble, 1973).