

Unsettling Obligations

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Essays on Reason, Reality
and the Ethics of Belief

Allen W. Wood

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To

David B. Lyons

*Philosopher,
Legal theorist,
longtime colleague
and friend*

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Preface

The following nine essays were originally written on different occasions and for different purposes. But there are common themes connecting them. The first four deal with topics relating to the ethics of belief, the middle two of these dealing specifically with religious beliefs. The next three essays are concerned with the reality that beliefs are about, the last two of these especially with defending and exploring the reality of values, especially moral values. The final two essays deal with philosophy, the first with the way it relates to its own history, the second with its worth and its limits. The connections run still deeper. In the sixth essay, the objectivity of values is defended on the basis of a conception of ourselves as active and self-regulating beings who communicate with one another about our actions and the principles that govern them. This is a conception also underlying the ethics of belief defended in the first essay, and whose application is found explicitly in the second, and may also be perceived in the three that follow.

The sixth essay also makes explicit a certain kind of argument that can be given for some philosophical claims, one based on achieving coherence between what we do, or commit ourselves to doing, in the course of our thinking and acting, and our reflective representation of ourselves as thinkers and agents. This kind of argument is distinctive in that it does not directly establish the truth of the claims to which it applies and its soundness is compatible with their falsehood. That we cannot choose, or even decide the question whether there are objective values, except by committing ourselves to the proposition that some values are objective, might be true even if it is false that there are any objective values. But this point, however correct, is cold comfort to anyone who proposes to deny that there are objective values, since it remains the case that this denial plunges that person into an incoherence between what they are asserting and what they are com-

mitting themselves to assert even in the act of asserting it. If there are any truths from which we are cut off in this way, they are truths that are inaccessible to any rational thinker. They are truths that could be believed only by someone who falls into incoherence, and who therefore we may be sure is cut off from many other truths, as well as from the kind of thinking that is necessary if we are to represent the person as able reliably to acquire any true beliefs at all. Propositions that might be true in this way are therefore propositions that we cannot coherently represent to ourselves as true; we have no choice but to regard them as false. And our inability coherently to regard them as true is not a weakness that some superior thinker might conceivably overcome; it goes along with being any kind of being at all that has thoughts and beliefs.

The need to maintain such a coherence was already part of the argument of the first four essays in defense of the claim that our intellectual integrity requires us to proportion our beliefs to the evidence rather than letting them service our wishes and fears. The sixth essay uses an argument of this kind to defend our commitment to the reality and objectivity of the reasons on the basis of which we both believe and act. Motivated failures to maintain this kind of coherence is used in the fourth and fifth essays to give an account of what goes on when we deceive ourselves. It also accounts for the temptation to certain kinds of relativism, whether in regard to ethics or in philosophy generally. The gap between what we do and what we represent ourselves as doing plays a role in the anti-moralistic theories discussed and explored in the seventh essay.

The need for reflective understanding of our practices that coheres with these practices is also fundamental to the conception of *philosophy* presented in the ninth essay. The same conception underlies the eighth essay's argument that the interpretations of past philosophers must be integrated into our present philosophical reflections if these interpretations are to remain a living part of philosophy and philosophy itself is not to become impoverished and opaque to itself.

This last point about the relation between philosophy and its history is also illustrated throughout virtually all the essays, which typically take the critical interpretation of historical philosophers as the vehicle for advancing philosophical claims and arguing for them or criticizing them. The first essay proposes an ethics of belief based on an ethical principle formulated by the nineteenth century philosopher W. K. Clifford, and it defends that principle on the basis of (a reinterpretation of) arguments given by Clifford, and also of the moral theories of Kant, whose views about revealed religion are also employed in the

third essay. The second essay discusses various views about religious belief by considering them in the historical form they take in thinkers such as Augustine, Aquinas, Pascal, Locke, Kant and Kierkegaard. The fourth essay investigates self-deception through a critical interpretation of Sartre's famous discussion of the topic. In the seventh essay, antimoralism is discussed via the views of Nietzsche and others. And even the account of philosophy itself in the ninth essay is presented via an exposition of the apology for philosophy included in Diderot's *Encyclopaedia*.

I would never maintain that philosophy cannot be done well without presenting and criticizing ideas and arguments in terms of their expression in historical representatives. There are simply too many obvious counterexamples to that claim among important figures in the history of philosophy themselves. But I do maintain that critically examining the thoughts that belong to the history of philosophy is one perfectly respectable way of doing philosophy, and that it has certain advantages that non-historical approaches to the subject do not have. Historical texts and positions are not useful merely for the sake of exhibiting erudition. Still less should one appeal to the authority of famous names by way of compensating for what might be lacking in philosophical argument. The writings of past philosophers often earn the respect of those who study them, and thereby create in us the well-founded expectation that we will learn more from them by patient exegesis than by arrogantly looking for opportunities to dismiss what they say. But that respect is earned only if we keep even the greatest historical texts under close critical surveillance.

When we do this, we find that we learn from them by attaining to the understanding they exhibit and the insights they afford, but equally by exposing the mistakes they commit and the errors they contain. Further, by engaging in a dialogue with these texts we not only to learn from them about philosophical issues but we also come to understand those issues by seeing how they are products of long traditions of thinking to which all philosophers are always attuned (whether they realize it or not). Dealing with philosophical ideas through their historical vehicles is perhaps the best way of making this inevitable aspect of philosophical thinking fully explicit. So another theme running through these essays, and especially culminating in the final pair, is the attempt to articulate certain ideas about what philosophy itself is and what philosophy as an activity is for. In certain respects, these ideas stand in contrast to what a lot of the tradition says about philosophy, and to much of what comes to most people's minds when they hear the word "philosophy".

Perhaps the first thing people are likely to think about “philosophy” is that it means the stating of grand opinions about the largest and most controversial questions, such as whether life is worth living, whether we can know anything or not, and whether God exists. Accordingly, to talk about “philosophy” means to deliver a disquisition on one’s *own* philosophy, which is more or less assumed to be a set of baseless opinions to which other “philosophies” (as other sets of equally baseless opinions) may be contrasted. This view arises naturally from the obvious and indisputable fact that philosophical questions are—and if we let experience be our guide, probably always will be—controversial questions. Whatever one philosopher asserts, another can be expected to deny; whatever one philosopher regards as settled and proven, another will try to call into question. From this people infer that “philosophy” is an arena in which anything at all may be claimed, without concerning yourself overly much with whether your answers to the questions might be right or wrong. In philosophy you can believe anything you like without caring whether you have good reasons for it or not; if you want what you believe to have some solid basis, then you should turn to other questions (scientific ones, for instance), to which there are (sometimes) right answers.

But the essays in this volume put these inferences themselves into question. They argue that however endless (or even seemingly pointless) philosophical controversies may be, you owe it to yourself and to others, as a thinking person, not simply to state “your opinion” on the basic issues of life but also to care about reasons for what you believe. The obligation to have good grounds for our beliefs is perhaps most urgent of all regarding questions about which there is probably going to be endless disagreement. In matters on which all informed inquirers agree, discharging this obligation is usually easy and comfortable. But on questions where any answer you give is going to be challenged, discharging it forces you into ever renewed inquiry, and probably also into endless doubt. Whatever opinion you reach (even the opinion that you must hold no opinion but must suspend all judgment), if it is reached in the right way, is never going to be something settled or fixed. It is rather something continually reacheived (and perhaps also subtly reshaped) through time, rather like the apparently stable result of a homeostatic equilibrium in nature.

We must resist, too, the appearance of consolation afforded by the skeptical thought that philosophical questions are unanswerable, that no decisive arguments regarding them are possible. For when they embrace that consolation, the skeptics themselves are too dogmatic, since the possibility of a decisive argument on one side or another of a philo-

sophical question is something they can never know to be impossible. The ancient skeptic's ideal that we should, or even can, reach a perfect balance between opposed assertions on every question is at least as inflexible and implausible as any dogmatic illusion ever taught by any other school of philosophy.

This leads us to question a second common opinion about "philosophy" (which would in any case be hard to reconcile with this first one). This is that the "philosopher" is a special kind of person, distinguished by "wisdom", and that this philosophical wisdom provides the philosopher with a certain special tranquility in facing all the problems of life, including the terrible riddle of death that stands at the end of it. For the ancient skeptics, this was the ideal of *ataraxia* to be attained by the philosopher through a perfect suspense of judgment; for the epicureans, it was the calm of the one who lives modestly and accepts the human being's limited place in nature; for the stoics, it was the emotionless resignation of the sage whose reason has comprehended the rational order of the cosmos. In Western culture, Plato's portrait of Socrates is perhaps the paradigm of this image of the philosopher. Like images of the philosophical sage are also a strong current running through ancient Chinese philosophy, as represented by Confucius or Lao Tzu.

As these examples indicate, this conception of philosophy, and of the philosopher, are products of a high culture, but also an essentially pre-modern one. The idea that a final grasp of the profound truths about life could be accessible of some lone individual is no longer sustainable in light of the achievements of the collectively self-critical enterprise of modern science, which has taught us to distrust all claims to final truth of any kind, and has also led us to expect whatever truth we achieve to come from the slow and patient labors of many more or less ordinary individuals working in co-operation, not from the special insights of some especially revered person. The ideal of the philosophical sage seems to me long overdue for the same kind of fond but devastating parody that Cervantes brilliantly gave to the equally outdated ideal of the knight errant at the beginning of the seventeenth century.

Although this conception of philosophy and the philosophical sage unquestionably has had a kind of afterlife in modern European culture (in Hegel, for instance, and even in the Enlightenment conception of the philosopher represented by the "apology" discussed in the ninth essay of this collection), it seems to presuppose the possibility of coming to terms through thought with the fundamental questions of philosophy in such a way as to achieve a kind of "final position" with regard to them (whether of knowledge, conviction, doubt or dismissal), which would afford a special sort of peace of mind from which the ordinary

or unphilosophical mind is excluded. The intellectual elitism of this conception seems to me not only unconvincing but even repugnant; any final reckoning with philosophical issues, moreover, seems incompatible with any honest assessment of where philosophical inquiry has led us in the past or seems likely to lead us in the future.

Though Plato's image of Socrates may be in part responsible for the ideal of philosophy against which I am arguing, the Socrates of Plato's *Apology* also illustrates something rather close to the point I am trying to make. When the oracle says that no human being is wiser than Socrates, Socrates interprets this as meaning that whereas others do not know and think they do, he alone has the truly human wisdom of knowing that he does not know. My slightly different claim is that the closest you can come to possessing a philosophical wisdom making you superior to ordinary people is to realize that there is no such thing as a philosophical wisdom that could make you superior to ordinary people.

If the task of philosophy is to reflect on our beliefs about large and controversial questions and to demand good grounds for those beliefs, then from what we know about the state of those questions and the proposed answers to them, the genuine philosopher will not turn out to be a person essentially wiser or calmer than ordinary people. Still less will a genuine philosopher be exempt from perplexity or anxiety in the face of the troubling questions of human life, or able to adopt an attitude of superior serenity in relation to those questions. On the contrary, a philosopher should be fully aware of the obligation to take these questions seriously, and the obligation to demand of oneself good reasons for holding beliefs about them. These obligations leave honest people to be eternal wanderers without any comfortable home as regards our basic beliefs about life and its meaning.

Our duty as thinking beings involve frequently raising again the deepest questions, worrying about them, looking *for* and *at* new arguments (and revisiting the old arguments) that are relevant to them, forming or re-forming one's views about them, which should never be so firm or confident that they cannot be easily unsettled by such reflections. Perhaps no one lives up to these obligations perfectly, just as no one does absolutely everything they can to make the world a better place. No one is in a position to be entirely content with what they have done, or what they are, or what they think and believe. No one is ever entitled to the sublime tranquility that is supposed to belong to the philosophical sage.

In this respect Martin Heidegger was quite right to think that modern science and the Enlightenment have made modern human beings

rootless and homeless. But he was deeply wrong in wanting to escape this condition through some sort of meditative philosophical thinking or mystical religious ekstasis. Still more repulsive is an escape through “returning to one’s roots” by identifying oneself with some national or ethnic or religious tradition. Whenever people turn away from “rationalism” and “universalism”, seeking to become “more human”, they actually make themselves *less* human, and often enough, they become *inhuman*.

The world is a mysterious and frightening place in which to pass our short lives beset in countless ways with contingencies and dissatisfactions. Pascal was right to look up into the heavens—as modern science was then beginning to reveal them—and exclaim: “The eternal silence of these infinite spaces terrifies me.” But it is the social world especially—the world for which human beings themselves are responsible—that is a very bad home. That world cries out to be changed, in some ways that ought to be quite clear to us, and also in others, no less urgent, where no one can be very sure how to bring about the changes that are needed. It is up to us to change this world, to make it better, and where we do not know how to make it better, to find out how. There is no guarantee, however, that we will ever find the solution to some problems, and where we know what to do, no guarantee that those struggling to do the right thing will win out over those who want to keep things as they are or even to take the world in a backward direction. When faced with such a deeply dissatisfying world, the serenity and complacency of the traditional philosophical sage is not a rational attitude—not even a morally decent one, especially for anyone who benefits from its evils and injustices.

Of course these facts about human life are not our fault. It is no single individual’s fault that human beings generally are foolish, selfish, fearful, vengeful, shortsighted. Even less is it anyone’s fault that human life is delivered over to contingency and chaos, that the awful riddles of life and death have no consoling solutions. Being weighed down with anxiety and guilt is therefore no more reasonable than being totally complacent and serene. Guilt too can be a kind of consoling illusion when its psychological function is to make us think that things make more sense in relation to ourselves than they really do. Nietzsche was therefore quite right to attack the “spirit of gravity” in philosophy, and to recommend light-heartedness in the face of life’s absurdity as one essential ingredient in a properly philosophical attitude toward life. But if correctly understood, that too is compatible with taking seriously our responsibilities as active, reflective, reason-giving

and reason-demanding beings, and trying to live up to the unsettling obligations they impose on us.

Thanks are due first to my son, Stephen, who diligently and skillfully copy-edited this book for CSLI Publications.

Because the essays collected here were composed over a number of years and in a variety of contexts, the thanks owing to others for helping to shape them is great, but the number of people deserving of it is too large for me to list them all. My way of thanking them collectively therefore has been to dedicate this book to my colleague of over twenty-five years, David Lyons. His intellectual integrity, rigor, and commitment to human equality and progressive social thinking make him the best representative I have known in my life of the philosophical spirit I have shared with all my colleagues and students, and have tried to express in these essays.

Since David is a modest person, and since we have not seen much of each other since we both left Cornell University, I suspect that he will be surprised by this dedication. But I hope the contents of the book come close enough to meeting the standards of philosophical excellence he has always represented to me.

A. W. W.