Fear and Reason

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Abstract
The subject of this paper is a particular kind of fear. The danger to which it is a response is the possibility that the evaluative dimension of life from which we derive the values by which we live is arbitrary. If it were arbitrary, nothing we value would be valuable. There are strong reasons both for and against this kind of fear. I am concerned with understanding these reasons and judging their strengths and weaknesses.

The fear I will discuss is a serious problem that stands in the way of living as we want. I propose a way of understanding the problem it presents, consider when the fear is and is not reasonable, and how we might cope with it it.

1. Fear in general and particular

Fear in general is a normal, natural, universally experienced emotion elicited by what we take to be a danger of some kind. The danger may be real or imagined, more or less threatening, the emotion may be more or less unpleasant and strong, and, if it is quite strong, it may disrupt life, threaten to turn into panic and overwhelm reasonable efforts to control it. The emotion is complex, typically combines beliefs and feelings about the danger with intentions to face or flee it and to express, control, or suppress the reaction to it. I say typically, because fear is possible in exceptional cases even if one or another of the usual beliefs, feelings, or intentions is absent. I write about them in the plural to indicate that there are many of them, they may conflict, and make us ambivalent about what we fear and what reaction we have to it. Fear is a warning of the physical, psychological, or social dangers we believe we face.[1]

[1] This is not the place for a review of the relevant works. Interested readers will find an excellent survey and a much fuller bibliography than I can give in Ronald de Sousa's <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2013/entries/emotion/>.

doi:10.1017/S0031819113000545 © The Royal Institute of Philosophy, 2013
First published online 20 August 2013

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819113000545 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Fear may or may not be reasonable. It is reasonable if it is a response to real danger and its strength is commensurate with the danger, neither excessive nor deficient. This is roughly the Aristotelian view, and I accept it.[2] Tweaking a little what he says about the good, fear in general is reasonable if it is directed toward the right object, to the right extent, at the right time, with the right aim, and in the right way.[3] It is unreasonable if it is misdirected in one of these ways or if one or more of its constitutive beliefs, feelings, and intentions is mistaken.

The particular kind of fear I aim to discuss is of the possibility that the evaluative dimension of life from which derive the values by which we live is arbitrary. If it were arbitrary, nothing we value would be valuable. All our evaluations would be mistaken. This would be one of the worst things that could happen to us. For then the distinctions we make between meaningful and meaningless lives, guilt and innocence, good and evil, justice and injustice, nobility and depravity would become untenable. This would happen, not because we drew the wrong distinctions when we might have drawn the right ones, but because all our evaluations would be arbitrary. We could not say then what does and does not have value, nor what has more and less value, because nothing has value. All our customary aesthetic, legal, moral, political, religious, and other evaluations would be arbitrary and we would not then know how we should live and act. Opting for any possibility would be as arbitrary as opting for any other.

We would still have basic needs, desires, and intentions to satisfy them, but we would not be able to say about any possibility beyond that basic level whether acting on it would be better or worse than not acting, or which way of acting would be better than any other. We would have no reason for valuing anything beyond the satisfaction of our basic needs, no reason to think that it is better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a pig satisfied. No way of life, no action would be worthwhile. It would also follow that our condemnations of vicious ideological or religious fanaticism, cannibalism, human sacrifice, slavery, child prostitution, murder, rape, and so forth, would be as arbitrary as the practices we used to think of as reasonable. Our world as we used to know it, the human world, would become devoid

[2] For the Aristotelian view, see David Konstan, *The Emotions of the Ancient Greeks*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006); Alexander Nehamas, 'Pity and Fear in the *Rhetoric* and the *Poetics*' and Martha C. Nussbaum, 'Tragedy and Self-Sufficiency: Plato and Aristotle on Fear and Pity' both in *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics*, (ed.) Amelie Rorty, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

[3] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1109a23-29.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819113000545 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of all but the most primitive values that concern the satisfaction of our basic needs. We would be left without any guide to how we should live and act. This would be a very serious danger indeed. It is reasonable to fear it and to do what we can to avoid it.

This is as yet an abstract possibility, and I want to make it concrete by a passage I take from Pascal's *Pensées*.[4] He writes: 'when I consider the short duration of my life, swallowed up in the eternity before and after, the little space I fill, and even can see, ingulfed in the infinite immensity of spaces of which I am ignorant, and which know me not, I am frightened, and am astonished at being here rather than there; for there is no reason why here rather than there, why now rather than then … The eternal silence of these infinite spaces frightens me.' If the infinite spaces were indeed eternally silent, then they would just be an immense collection of facts in constant flux without a beginning or an end. If the world were like that, nothing in it would have any value. And that is how I interpret what Pascal would have found frightening.

I say 'would have' because in fact he did not. He was a Catholic of the Jansenist faith, and he thought that the world is infused with a providential order. The values we ought to have are part of that order, and we know what they are because it has been revealed to us. The world appears silent, he thought, only to those who do not listen.

Pascal wrote this in the seventeenth century and much has changed since. We have learned a great deal from cosmology and other sciences about those infinite spaces. But none of that changes the fact that if we do not have faith in a providential order, then it is possible that the world contains only facts but no values. Perhaps we only think that there are values because we rely on a dimension of life that is arbitrary. If that were true, then all our evaluations would rest on a faith that differs only in detail from Pascal's. Perhaps the entire evaluative dimension of life and its values are parts of an absurd fairy tale we tell ourselves to fend off our fear of the eternal silence of the infinite spaces in which for a passing moment we occupy a minuscule spot?[5]

[4] Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. W.F. Trotter, (New York: Random House, 1670/1941), 205–6.

[5] This possibility of course has been much discussed. See, e.g. Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, (New York: Random House, 1942/1955); Thomas Nagel, 'The Absurd' in *Mortal Questions*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979) and Chapter XI in *The View from Nowhere*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); and Richard Taylor, Chapter 18 in *Good and Evil*, (New York: Macmillan, 1970).

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Bernard Williams says about our evaluations that 'to see the world from the human point of view is not an absurd thing for human beings to do.'[6] This is not quite true. It is true that there is no other point of view from which we could see the world. That, however, is not our only option. We can refuse to form any systematic point of view of the world and just live from day to day, like the lilies of the field do, as has been recommended by you know who. Or we may say as Melville's Bartleby memorably said and repeated again and again: 'I would rather not'. But this is very difficult. Bartleby did it, and died from it.

Those of us who are less stalwart than Bartleby and less innocent than Jesus reportedly said we should be, do form a view of the world, and it cannot be anything but a human view. But saying with Williams that this is not an absurd thing for us to do is not nearly enough. It could be ours and arbitrary and unreasonable. If we do not have a better reason for it than that it is ours, then we face the questions I am asking: Is the evaluative dimension of life that is an essential component of our point of view a fairy tale we tell ourselves? Is it more than the product of our fear of the eternal silence of those infinite spaces? Are it and its values anything more than absurd noises we make to counter the eternal threatening silence of the world of facts? Is it possible that nothing we value is valuable?

2. Attempted answers

The evaluations we make now, as we believe things are, are internal to the evaluative dimension of our life. They make sense and they are or are not reasonable, given the values of the evaluative dimension. But the question I ask and the one Pascal wants us to face is external to the evaluative dimension. It is not a question about reasons for any particular value, but a question about reasons for the entire evaluative dimension of life with all of its actual and possible values. The question is: is the evaluative dimension itself reasonable? We certainly hope and wish that it is reasonable, and we reasonably fear that it might not be, but our hope, wish, and fear do not begin to amount to any better reason than what Pascal had for his Jansenist faith.

It is beside the point in trying to answer this question that the scientific view of the world has been and continues to give us more

[6] Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, (London: Collins, 1985), 118.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819113000545 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and more knowledge of facts. What we need reason for is not what we take to be facts but for the evaluative dimension that contains all our values. The scientific view of the world is not meant to and cannot provide that reason. Omniscience about the facts, were that possible, would only enable us to know what we value, not whether it is valuable.

Nor is it an acceptable answer to rely on the supposed practical success of the evaluative dimension of our life. In the first place, whether it is in fact successful depends on some evaluative standard by which its success and failure can be judged. But the only standard we have comes from the only source it could, namely, the very evaluative dimension that is in question. To rely on that is to assume that the reasons we need have already been given. By that strategy anything could be made to seem reasonable.

In the second place, even if we rely on some standard internal to the evaluative dimension, it is by no means obvious that it has been successful in its own terms. Hegel has rightly, and for him with unusual eloquence, said that 'when we contemplate this display of passions and the consequences of their violence, the unreason which is associated not only with them, but even – rather we might say *especially* – with good designs and righteous aims; when we see arising therefrom the evil, the vice, the ruin that has befallen the most flourishing kingdoms which the mind of man ever created, we can hardly avoid being filled with sorrow at this universal taint of corruption. And since this decay is not the work of mere nature, but of human will, our reflections may well lead us to a moral sadness, a revolt of the good will – if indeed it has a place within us. Without rhetorical exaggeration, a simple truthful account of the miseries that have overwhelmed the noblest nations and polities and the finest exemplars of private virtue forms a most fearful picture and excites emotions of the profoundest and most hopeless sadness, counter-balanced by no consoling results.'[7] If still in doubt, watch the news.

Yet another attempt to provide the reason we need is what I will call the 'simply there strategy' recommended by both Nagel and Williams, who follow Wittgenstein's dictum: 'What has to be accepted, the given, is – so one could say – *forms of life*.'[8] According to Nagel, we must ask whether the proposed 'external' explanations make it reasonable to withdraw … a first-order judgment, or to

[7] G.F.W. Hegel, *Reason in History*, trans. R.S. Hartman, (New York: Liberal Arts, 1953), 26–7.

[8] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1968), 226.

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recognize its subjective character (or the subjective character of the whole domain).' And he says: no because 'these are questions *within* arithmetic or ethics'. He goes on: 'One cannot just *exit* from the domain of moral reflection: It is simply there. All one can do is to proceed with it in the light of whatever new historical or psychological evidence may be offered. It's the same everywhere. Challenges to the objectivity of science can be met only by further scientific reasoning, challenges to the objectivity of history by history, and so forth.'[9] In remarkably similar words, Williams says, writing about a basic liberal belief, 'there is nothing more basic in terms of which to justify it. We know that most people in the past have not shared it; we know that there are others in the world who do not share it now. But for us, it is simply there.'[10]

The aim of this simply there strategy is to make it illegitimate to ask questions external to the evaluative dimension of our life. But in fact such questions have been and are asked all the time, and often thoughtfully. Who among us has not wondered in a reflective moment whether the form of life into which we have been born and in which we live might not be deeply flawed? Rebels, skeptics, conscientious objectors, revolutionaries, prophets, poets, and philosophers have again and again questioned the prevailing form of life. If the simply there strategy is a sociological observation, then it is certainly false. Cases abound in which people actively question the objectivity of science, history, ethics, and of any other first-order judgment. And hard as it is to believe, there actually are some people in our form of life, both on the right and the left, who question liberalism, and their questions could not be reasonably answered from within liberalism.

If the simply there strategy does not rest on a sociological claim, then why should we suppose that external questions about the reasons for the entire evaluative dimension of our life are somehow illegitimate? Perhaps it is true that such questions have no convincing answers. But surely that need not make them illegitimate. It might make them very good questions that should be asked about the reasons for what so many of us believe. Asking such questions has been from Socrates on one of the most basic responsibilities of philosophers. The questions may be unanswerable because the evaluative

[9] Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 21.

[10] Bernard Williams, 'Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline' in *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*, (ed.) A.W. Moore, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 195.

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dimension is not reasonable. That means, however, that the possibility we fear has come to pass: the entire evaluative dimension of our life is no more than a fairy tale we made up, told ourselves, and have come to believe in order to relieve our fear of the eternal silence of the infinite spaces.

3. Decentering

I turn now to decentering as a quite different way of responding to the question about reasons for the evaluative dimension of life. Decentering is neither a direct answer nor an attempt to reject the question as illegitimate. It is rather an attempt to cast doubt on the centrality of the question. To say this is tantamount to inviting contempt for the evasion. But matters are more complicated, as I will now argue. First, however, I need to say what decentering – a rarely used but apt word – means in the present context. I follow the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* in defining the verb as 'to cause to lose or shift from an established center or focus; especially: to disconnect from practical or theoretical assumptions of origin, priority, or essence.' The proposal I will now consider is that we should decenter the question about reasons for the established evaluative dimension of life as it exists in a society at a certain time.

I am going to make some assumptions about what makes the evaluative dimension of life in a society established. One is that its aim is not to discover facts – that can and should be left to common sense and science – but to evaluate the significance of relevant facts. Another is that it meets minimum epistemological conditions: logically consistency, acceptance of the relevance of confirmations and disconfirmations, openness to the possibility of revision, having some way of dealing with problems, and being action-guiding. A further one is the recognition that not just it but all defenders of all evaluative dimensions of all societies are fallible. Lastly, it meets not just the minimum epistemological conditions, but also the following minimum social ones. It has endured for a longish time, lasting decades rather than months. It is voluntarily accepted by a large proportion of people in a society who are not coerced by indoctrination or manipulation, and who, although they have exit-rights, do not exercise them. It is responsive to changing conditions by being open to criticism, enlargement, and reform in various particular respects. And those who accept it spontaneously evaluate how they and others live and act by the values of the evaluative dimension of life of their society.

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In a society at a certain time, there can be more than one established evaluative dimension. In large pluralistic tolerant societies, inhabited by several ethnic groups and waves of immigrants, there may be several evaluative dimensions existing side-by-side, overlapping in some respects and differing in others. And of course an established evaluative dimension can be mistaken if its general acceptance rests on bad reasons. Those who accept it can be mistaken both individually and collectively. But if an established evaluative dimension is thought to be mistaken, then it needs to be explained how it is that people have generally accepted it and are content to live according to it.

It is possible to provide such an explanation, but it is more complicated than commonly supposed. Part of the explanation is to distinguish between two levels of acceptance. On one level, the acceptance is of particular values. On a deeper level, the acceptance is of the basic assumptions on which the entire evaluative dimension of life rests. The explanations on the two levels are similar in that those who have accepted both the particular values and the general assumptions have no reason to question either. If they had reasons, they would not have accepted the values or the assumptions, since they would not want to be guided by the wrong values. There is, however, also a crucial difference between the explanations on the two levels. Even if they have no reason to question particular values under the prevailing conditions, they may come to have reasons when conditions change. Then they may become critical of some particular value and want to abandon or reform it. But they will have no such reasons about the basic assumptions, because the basic assumptions are the standards by which they decide what counts as a reason. It is, for instance, one thing to question whether any particular aesthetic, legal, moral, political, or religious value is really valuable, and quite another to question whether anything at all is valuable. This is an important difference and I will come back to it.

It should be clear from this explanation that decentering is not another name for relativism. The minimum epistemological and social conditions I have specified make it possible to claim that some evaluative dimension of life are unreasonable if they fail to meet these conditions. But the fact remains that many long-established evaluative dimensions do meet these conditions. The first formulation of the claim I now consider is that if the evaluative dimensions of life in a society does meet the conditions, and if those who accept it see no reasons to think that it is mistaken, then it is not unreasonable for them to decenter questions about their

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reasons for it. I will proceed by considering examples in which this has actually happened.

4. Examples

I take the first from Evans-Pritchard's discussion of Azande beliefs and practices.[11] Witchcraft occupies a central place in Azande life. They attribute many of the bad things that happen to the malignant power of witches. They have a method for identifying witches and they believe that witchcraft is hereditary. If someone is a witch, then everyone in a witch's family is a witch. Evans-Pritchard lived with the Azande, spoke their language, and conversed freely with them. He pointed out to some intelligent Azande elders that it follows from the frequency with which people are found by them to be witches that all families, and consequently all individuals, must be witches. The remarkable reaction of the Azande elders to this wicked piece of reasoning was total indifference. They simply ignored it, they were not in the least disturbed by it, and continued to identify witches as before. They had no interest in the matter. One wants to know: why did this not make them doubt their beliefs about witches and witchcraft?

Evans-Pritchard says in answer that the Azande have 'no incentive to agnosticism. All their beliefs hang together. … In this web of belief every strand depends upon every other strand, *and a Zande cannot get out of its meshes because it is the only world he knows. The web is not an external structure in which he is enclosed. It is the texture of his thought and he cannot think that his thought is wrong*' [the italics are in the original].[12] Evans-Pritchard had found a serious problem with the evaluative dimension of Azande life, but the Azande were not interested in it. They dealt with it by decentering it.

I think they had a good reason for this. Their situation was not that they could opt for one of several evaluative dimensions and they opted for one whose serious problem they have unreasonably evaded. They knew of no alternative to the evaluative dimension of their own life. If

[11] E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936). For most interesting discussions of it, see Peter Winch, 'Understanding a Primitive Society' in *Ethics and Action*, (London: Routledge, 1964/1972) and Robin Horton's 'African Traditional Thought and Western Science' in *Rationality*, (ed.) Bryan R. Wilson, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967/1970).

[12] Ibid. 194.

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they had abandoned it, their entire form of life would have collapsed. What they did instead was to decenter the serious problem with it by tacitly assuming that there is some way of coping with it, even if, then and there, they could not say what it was. They did what we ourselves do when we find that we do not what caused a particular event. We do not give up our basic commitment to causal explanation. We tacitly assume that the event had a cause, even if we cannot now say what it was. We, like the Azande, 'have no incentive to agnosticism' and, notwithstanding the serious problem Hume found, decenter doubts about causal explanation. 'I can only observe what is commonly done; which is, that this difficulty is seldom or never thought of; and even where it has once been present to the mind, is quickly forgot, and leaves but a small impression behind it. Very refin'd reflections have little or no influence upon us.'[13]

The second example is discussed by Robin Horton. It concern a reaction of the Kalabari, a tribe that when the decentering occurred lived close to the subsistence level under inhospitable conditions in sub-Saharan Africa. The decentering concerned the reaction of the Kalabari to encountering the first white man. 'The first white man, it is said, was seen by a fisherman who had gone down to the mouth of the estuary in his canoe. Panic-stricken, he raced home and told his people what he had seen: whereupon he and the rest of the town set out to purify themselves – that is, to rid themselves of the influence of the strange and monstrous thing that had intruded into the world.'[14] The Kalabari needed to protect themselves from challenges to the evaluative dimension of their life that had no way of dealing with strange and monstrous events. They did not have the luxury of an open and inquiring sensibility. All their energies had to be concentrated on eking out a living. They did not see the first white man as a reason for questioning the evaluative dimension of their life that knew nothing of such monstrosity, but as a threat to their survival, and they dealt with it by decentering the problem it presented. They tacitly assumed, not unreasonably, that their survival was more important than answering questions about the evaluative dimension of their life on which their survival depended.

We do not have to go to distant lands and times to find examples of reasonable decentering. I turn to cases much closer to home. Montaigne was for many years a magistrate whose duty was to administer the laws. He wrote: 'Consider the form of this justice that

[13] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 2nd ed. P.H. Nidditch, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1739/1978), 268.

[14] Horton, 'African Traditional Thought' *op. cit.*, 165.

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governs us: it is a true testimony of human imbecility, so full it is of contradiction and error. … [They] are sickly parts and unjust members of the very body and essence of justice' (819).[15] 'How many condemnations I have seen more criminal than the crime!' (820). 'There is nothing so grossly and widely and ordinarily faulty as the laws' (821). He sees that 'in every government there are of them resort to dissimulation and lying. … The justest party is still a member of a worm-eaten maggoty body. But in such a body the lest diseased member is called healthy. … Civic innocence is measured according to places and the times' (760). 'He who walks in the crowd must step aside, keep his elbows in, step back or advance, even leave the straight way, according to others, not according to what he proposes to himself but according to what others propose to him, according to the time, according to the men, according to the business' (758). He sees that 'our moral are extremely corrupt, and lean with a remarkable inclination toward the worse; of our laws and customs, many are barbarous and monstrous; however, because of the difficulty of improving our condition and the danger of everything crumbling into bits, if I could put a spoke in our wheel and stop at this point, I would do so with all my heart' (497).

Montaigne, like the Azande and the Kalabari, wanted to protect the prevailing evaluative dimension of life, defective as it was, by regarding challenges to it as more dangerous than leaving its defects uncorrected. He feared that it might lead to 'everything crumbling into bits'. He, like them, decentered questions about reasons for the prevailing evaluative dimension in order to avoid the danger of its disintegration.

You may think that Montaigne was a softie with dubious commitment to reason who did not follow reason wherever it led him. So consider Descartes who was certainly not reluctant to do so. In the appropriately titled *Discourse on the Method of rightly conducting one's reason and seeking the truth in the science*, he, as every philosophy major knows, questions *everything* and accepts *nothing* until he had found sufficient reasons for it – well, almost everything and not quite nothing.

> 'Lest I should remain indecisive in my actions while reason obliged me to be so in my judgments, and in order to live as

[15] Michel de Montaigne, *Essays* in *The Complete Works of Montaigne*, trans. Donald M. Frame, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1588/1979). Reference in the text are to the pages of this edition.

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> happily as I could during this time, I formed for myself a provisional moral code consisting of just three or four maxims, which I should like to tell you about. The first was to obey the laws and customs of my country, holding constantly to the religion in which by God's grace I had been instructed from my childhood, and governing myself according to the most moderate and least extreme opinions – the opinions commonly accepted in practice by the most sensible of those with whom I should have to live.'[16]

As Descartes was laying the foundation of modern science, he not only left the prevailing evaluative dimension of life as he found it, but explained that while he was doing his revolutionary work, he told himself and he tells us, that 'you must also provide yourself with some other place where you can live comfortably while building is in progress'.[17] Like the Azande, the Kalabari, and Montaigne, he realized that he needed a safe haven from which to venture out to change how we think of the world of facts. The evaluative dimension of life of his society was that safe haven. It would have been easy for him to question it with the same relentlessness as he questioned the commonly accepted view of the facts, but he did not. He had decentered the reasons that were obviously available to him for extending his questioning from facts to values. He saw that the demands for reasons can go only so far, that not everything can be up for grabs, and that while he can question much, he must keep something unquestioned, if for no other reason than to protect himself and the conditions in which questioning can go on.

The last case of decentering is perhaps the most likely to be familiar to readers of this paper. Hume concludes his examination of skepticism about our beliefs and reasons with observing that 'we have, therefore, no choice left but betwixt a false reason and none at all.' And he goes on, 'Most fortunately it happens, that since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium. … I find myself absolutely and necessarily determin'd to live, and talk, and act like other people in the common affairs of life.'[18] As the others I have cited, Hume is committed to decentering skeptical questions about reasons for the evaluative dimension of life in his society.

[16] Rene Descartes, 'Discourse on the Method …' in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. John Cottingham, et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1637/1985), vol. **I**, 122.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Hume, *Treatise*, *op. cit.*, 268–269.

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I ask: are the Azande, the Kalabari, Montaigne, Descartes, Hume, and the countless others who follow them all guilty of unreasonable and contemptible evasion by decentering questions about reasons for the entire evaluative dimension of their life?

5. Reasons for decentering

I begin with a metaphor that has been used more than once. We sail a vast, shark-infested sea with no known port. Storms come and go, our supplies have to be rationed and replenished from the sea. We pick up from the flotsam of wrecks we encounter what we think we might be able to use to keep our ship afloat. We and the crew nominally in control of the ship are, so to speak, in the same boat. Occasionally someone falls overboard and is promptly destroyed by the sharks. The ship is uncomfortable, leaks, and we have to keep repairing it. Everyone is dissatisfied and no one is sure what we should do. We have no map, nor a clue about the direction in which we should sail and we have to keep learning how to repair our leaky vessel.

But one option we do not have: to abandon the ship. We may be aware of the possibility, but we dismiss it out of hand as unthinkable. Even the worst option we have on the ship is better than abandoning the ship. So we decenter the question. Is that unreasonable?

It will be said that this is a bad metaphor. The evaluative dimension of our life is not a solitary ship on a vast sea. It is one evaluative dimensions among many that we know others are guided by now or have been in the past. We know history, we can travel, we have books, and we can turn to them to find reasons for or against the evaluative dimension of our life in contrast and comparison with others. Unlike those on the ship, we can abandon our evaluative dimension and replace it with another. All this is true, but it does not make the metaphor bad.

In the first place, we have to decide whether some other evaluative dimension of life would be better than the one we have. What reason could we have for making that decision? Any reason we might have would have to come from the evaluative dimension we have. We cannot consistently rely on it for reasons and abandon it for those reasons. And, of course, the same is true of any other evaluative dimension from which we might derive reasons. But perhaps the reason we have for abandoning ours is that we are dissatisfied with it? That, however, is not a good reason for abandoning it. We are dissatisfied with it because we have the values we have, and we derive them from the evaluative dimension of our life. Our dissatisfactions

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actually strengthen those values of our evaluative dimension on which we rely to criticize the evaluative dimension for falling short. Furthermore, among the things we learn from history, travel, and books is that others are also dissatisfied with the evaluative dimension of their life, just as we are with ours. Our dissatisfactions are reasons for reforming what we have, rather than abandoning it for a far less familiar other evaluative dimension that would also have to be reformed, in ways and by means we cannot foresee, in order to avoid dissatisfactions with it.[19]

In the second place, if we have abandoned the evaluative dimension of our life and opted for another, we would not have abandoned our reliance on some evaluative dimension. We still need a ship to keep afloat. We would merely have changed ships. If we are reasonable, we will recognize that we cannot live a recognizably human life without relying on some evaluative dimension and its values to distinguish between our good and bad, and better and worse possibilities. It is reasonable to decenter questions about whether it is reasonable to rely on some evaluative dimension to enable us to draw those distinctions. Having a life worth living depends on it. One main reason for decentering, then, is that there is no reasonable alternative to it.

It is important to realize that decentering is not a reason for refraining from criticizing particular values of our evaluative dimension. There is nothing that stops the Kalabari from criticizing some of their fishing techniques. The Azande can recognize that some identifications of witches may be mistaken. Montaigne is free to propose better laws than those currently in use in his time. Descartes can allow himself to think that some components of the commonly

[19] 'Too many social reformers have an idea that they would like to clean the canvas … of the social world, wiping off everything and starting from scratch. … This idea is nonsense and impossible to realize. … If we wipe out the social world in which we live, wipe out its traditions and create a new world on the basis of blue-prints, then we shall very soon have to alter the new world, making little changes and adjustments. But if we are to make these little changes and adjustments, which will be needed in any case, why not start them here and now in the social world we have? It does not matter what you have and where you start. You must always make little adjustments. Since you will always have to make them, it is very much more sensible and reasonable to start with what happens to exist at the moment, because of these things which exist we at least know where the shoe pinches. We at least know of certain things that they are bad and that we want them changed.' Karl R. Popper, 'Towards a Rational Theory of Tradition' in *Conjectures and Refutations*, (New York: Harper, 1968), 131.

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accepted moral code are inconsistent with others. And Hume can recognize that some widely held religious beliefs, say about miracles, are mistaken. Decentering does not cast doubt on the distinction between good and bad, better and worse reasons for values. It casts doubt on there being a strong enough reason for abandoning the entire evaluative dimension that makes life worth living. That doubt is consistent with questioning the particular values of particular evaluative dimensions. These reasons for decentering, however, do not entitle us to conclude that decentering is reasonable because there are also reasons against it. I now turn to those reasons.

6. Reasons against decentering

I return to a distinction I drew earlier between questioning some particular values and questioning the basic assumptions of an entire evaluative dimension. Consider a case in point. Thomas Reid was a clergyman, a philosopher, and a devout believer. He writes: 'we acknowledge that nothing can happen under the administration of the Deity, which he does not see fit to permit.' Yet the existence 'of natural and moral evil is a phenomenon which cannot be disputed. To account for this phenomenon under the government of a Being of infinite goodness, justice, wisdom, and power, has, in all ages, been considered difficult to human reason.'[20] And he goes on, as a philosopher should, to ask: 'Since it is supposed, that the Supreme Being had no other end in making and governing the universe, but to produce the greatest happiness to his creatures in general, how comes it to pass, that there is so much misery in a system made and governed by infinite wisdom and power?' He answers, as a philosopher should not, that: 'If it be asked, why does God permit so much sin in his creation? I confess I cannot answer the question, but must lay my hand upon my mouth. He giveth no account of his conduct to the children of men. It is our part to obey his commands, not to say unto him, why dost thou thus?' (353).

This is just the attitude, honest though it is, that gives a bad name to decentering. Critics of it will say that decentering is nothing but a pretentious name for the evasion of difficult problems to which defenders of the evaluative dimension of their own life have no reasonable response. Reid may reply by saying that even though he is unable to provide the needed reasons, his inability reflects only on the particular

[20] Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of the Human Mind*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1814/1969), 349.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819113000545 Published online by Cambridge University Press

aspect of the Christian evaluative dimension that concerns the problem of evil, and that leaves intact the basic assumptions of that dimension. He might add that all large-scale dimensions of life, evaluative or scientific, have problems to which they have no satisfactory response, yet the problems leave a large part of that dimension intact. And the same goes for the Christian evaluative dimension. But this will not satisfy the critics. For they will say that the problem of evil is not a particular problem within the Christian evaluative dimension. It is a problem that invalidates one of the basic assumptions on which the entire dimension rests. They will say that the existence of evil is incompatible with the existence of God, and that is as basic as it gets in the Chistian evaluative dimension of life.

In this disagreement both defenders and critics agree about distinguishing between problems about some aspect of an evaluative dimension of life and problems about one of its basic assumptions. But they disagree whether a particular problem is about an aspect or about a basic assumption. The implications of this disagreement are crucial. For if the problem is taken to be about an aspect of an evaluative dimension, then not having a reasonable response to it is a relatively minor internal problem, and all evaluative dimensions of life have such minor problems. But if the problem is taken to be about one of its basic assumptions, then it becomes a problem that affects the entire evaluative dimension. If there is no reasonable response to it, then the entire dimension is arbitrary.

This disagreement between defenders and critics affects all evaluative dimensions, not just the Christian one. Consider, for instance, what may be called the evaluative dimension of the Enlightenment. It is a relatively minor problem within it that apparently reasonable and decent people nevertheless sometimes inexcusably and unjustifiably act immorally. But it is a major problem about the entire dimension if it seems that there is something like the secular equivalent of original sin and people are basically ambivalent about living reasonably and morally. This is the clear implication of the significance the undeniable historical facts to which Hegel reminds us in the passage I have quoted earlier. How else could we explain the constant presence throughout history of war, torture, ideological and religious atrocities, mass murders, man's inhumanity to man, and to women as well? The minor problem is manageable within the evaluative dimension of the Enlightenment; the major problem indicates the inadequacy of its basic assumption that human beings are perfectible, since the facts testify also to human imperfectibility. Perhaps there is also a secular problem of evil? Is there a reasonable way of resolving such disagreements about whether a recognized problem is minor or major?

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There is if we are clear about what makes an assumption basic. A basic assumption is one that is directly or indirectly presupposed by all the particular values of a particular evaluative dimension of life. If it turns out to be arbitrary, then the entire dimension becomes arbitrary. If God does not exist, then the Christian values of sin, salvation, miracles, and so forth are arbitrary. If human beings are not perfectible, then the Enlightenment values of liberty, equality, justice, and so forth are arbitrary. If the requirements of reason and morality diverge, then the Kantian values of good will, duty, kingdom of ends, and so forth are arbitrary. If there are no historical laws, then the Marxist values of progress, a classless society without alienation, the justification of revolution, and so forth are arbitrary. And so on. There is, therefore, a reasonable way of resolving disagreements about whether a problem is minor or major. The problem is major if it casts doubt on a basic assumption that is presupposed by the entire evaluative dimension and defenders of it have no reasonable response to it. Otherwise, it is minor.

It may be thought that one main reason against decentering is that if an evaluative dimension of life has a major problem, and if its defenders have no reasonable response to it, then they ought to face the arbitrariness of that dimension, rather than divert their attention from it, ignore it, evade the truth that all their values about how they should live and act are mistaken. They should face the truth rather than obfuscate what they are doing by calling it decentering. It may be thought that civilized life, human dignity, self-respect all require a commitment to facing the truth, even if it is unpleasant – perhaps especially then. How else could we improve our lives, make our society better, and cope with our problems? As Bernard Williams movingly put it close to the end of last book – and his life – 'The hope that a truthful story on a large enough scale will not cause despair is already hope.'[21] This thought is likely to strike a responsive chord in those who follow Socrates in thinking that the unexamined life is not worth living.

7. Reasonable fear

There is, however, also another thought. This one is Nietzsche's: 'There is no pre-established harmony between the furtherance of

[21] Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 268.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819113000545 Published online by Cambridge University Press

truth and the well-being of mankind.'[22] If this is itself true, then the hope of which Williams writes may well be false hope? And even if what Socrates says is also true and the unexamined life is not worth living, it may also be true that the examined life is not worth living either. It is not unreasonable to ask why commitment to facing the truth should be unconditional, regardless of the despair it might bring? What if the examination of our life leads to self-loathing, and make us worse off than we were before we undertook this dangerous inward journey? And what if the examination is not of our own life but of the evaluative dimension that has a decisive influence on what our life is? What if that examination also leads to despair? Is it so unreasonable, so contemptibly evasive to try to avoid that danger, and direct our attention elsewhere? It seems to me that neither Williams's nor Nietzsche's thought is unreasonable. Perhaps it is reasonable to fear more the bad news that facing the truth might reveal than hope that the truth will bring good news? Decentering may be a counsel of reason, not a symptom of unreason.

There may be reasons both for and against decentering. And these reasons need not be incompatible. Just as we may have reasons both for and against getting a divorce, having children, changing jobs, committing suicide, emigrating, and so forth, so we may have reasons both for and against decentering questions about the entire evaluative dimension of our life.

It seems to me that it may be reasonable both to hope that the pursuit of truth will reveal that the evaluative dimension of our life is reasonable and to fear that it will show that it is arbitrary and unreasonable. Both the hope and the fear are allowed by reason, but, in this paper, I am concerned with the fear. It is not unreasonable to fear a condition in which 'all the decent drapery of life is to be rudely torn off. All the super-added ideas, furnished from the wardrobe of moral imagination, which the heart owns, and the understanding ratifies, as necessary to cover the defects of our naked shivering nature, and to raise it to dignity in our own estimation, are to be exploded as a ridiculous, absurd, and antiquated fashion.'[23]

Suppose that it is pointed out to an educated Azande or Kalabari, or to Montaigne, Descartes, and Hume that their decentering attitude is motivated by fear. Suppose further that they do what Pascal has done: examine their motives and agree that they are motivated

[22] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human All Too Human*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1878/1996), I. 517.

[23] Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1790/1969), 171.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819113000545 Published online by Cambridge University Press

by fear. Would that make their fear and the decentering that it motivates unreasonable? Why would it not be open to them to respond by saying that it is perfectly reasonable to fear the collapse of the evaluative dimension of their life on which all that they value in life depends? I do not think that such a response would be unreasonable. But neither do I think that it is the only reasonable response. It is also a reasonable response not to allow our fear to divert us from the pursuit of truth. Both responses are allowed by reason and neither is contemptible.

Fear of course may be unreasonable. However, fearing the danger that our evaluative dimension of our life may collapse is not unreasonable. What is unreasonable is to claim that reason requires all of us always in all circumstances to be guided by an unconditional commitment to the pursuit of truth regardless of any other consideration. Some people may live according to that commitment. Perhaps Nietzsche was one of them, and his insanity may have been the price he paid for it. Others may be more fortunate. But it is not unreasonable not to make that unconditional commitment. That does not mean indifference to the truth. The truth certainly matters. However, there are also other things that matter, they may conflict with the pursuit of truth, and there are good reasons why one should not always override the other. Fearing danger and pursuing truth may both be reasonable if directed toward the right object, to the right extent, at the right time, with the right aim, and in the right way, and unreasonable if they fail to be so directed.

8. Fear as an enduring problem

The evaluative dimension of our life is the bulwark that stands between the eternal silence of the infinite spaces and the human world we have created. The values we derive from the evaluative dimension of our life guide us in the interstices when the necessities to which we are unavoidably subject leave us some possibilities among which we can choose. Having such possibilities and making reasonable choices about them is the luxury our evolutionary good fortune enables us to enjoy. We can make good or bad uses of it. The evaluative dimension of our life enables us to distinguish between good and bad uses, opt for the good ones, and protect ourselves from those who make the bad ones. This makes civilized life possible. When we fear the collapse of the evaluative dimension of our life, we fear the collapse of civilized life. We fear the breach of the bulwark between the world of facts with its eternally silent infinite

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819113000545 Published online by Cambridge University Press

spaces and the human world. This is a danger that we reasonably fear. And it reasonably limits the pursuit of truth if it threatens to lead to the collapse of the evaluative dimension of our life. Decentering is our strategy for maintaining that limit.

This fear can get out of hand. We can become too fearful and see danger lurking behind every effort to correct the defects of some, perhaps many, of the values that jointly form the evaluative dimension of our life. No evaluative dimension is perfect, and those known to us all have serious defects. Our attempts to identify and correct these defects are also among the conditions of civilized life. And if fear gets out of hand, it becomes an obstacle to it. Just as the pursuit of truth must be kept within reasonable limits, so must be our fear of the collapse of the evaluative dimension of our life. The tension between the pursuit of truth and fear of the danger to which it might lead is and always has been part of civilized life. Stressing either at the expense of the other is one of the defects to which all evaluative dimensions are vulnerable, ours no less than others. This is why distinguishing between reasonable and unreasonable fear is an enduring problem of civilized life. We need to recognize that 'there is no consideration of any kind that overrides all other considerations in all conceivable circumstances.'[24,25]

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[24] Stuart Hampshire, *Innocence and Experience*, (London: Allen Lane, 1989), 172.

[25] I gratefully acknowledge the comments of and conversation with Krisanna Scheiter that led to several improvements of this paper.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819113000545 Published online by Cambridge University Press