

Book review ‘‘Morality’’ by Jonathan Sacks

The final book by celebrated author and Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks concerns perhaps the most important and difficult intellectual project undertaken by our species: the rules and frameworks by which we should live and approach one another. The intrinsic difficulty of the task, given the disagreements both within and beyond academic contexts, is one reason why Sacks has quite the task ahead of him. Another is more particular to the general mood and attitude of our times, which include aspects of individualism, pluralism, and secularism that by now are ingrained in Western culture.

On pain of stating the obvious, I should mention that my own political, epistemological, metaphysical, and moral leanings are very far removed from what I gather is the natural affirming readership of this work. Indeed, much of my criticism below could be gathered as ‘‘left of field’’ by those of conservative sensibilities. From my end, accurately interpreting and representing exactly what Sacks is after will remain a constant challenge. The bombardment of suggestions and the webs of associations give me pause as to what could comprise a coherent argument.

On the other hand, the erudition displayed, the sheer scale of the project at hand, and above all the humanity of the author that shines throughout make me want to love the book. There is also the fact that the work is immensely readable. I found myself glued to the pages on more than one occasion.

But this readability is also a trap. The language is pleasant but not always very precise. It is important to straddle the line between what can be conveyed with ease in a colloquial tone, and the deep and profound difficulty intrinsic to communication in any worthwhile intellectual project. In this dichotomy, the author sways towards the former at the latter’s expense.

I suppose the central argument can be stated briefly. The cultural revolution of the ‘60 and its aftermath have left traditional institutions outside of the marketplace and with at most a formal relation with established politics- marriage, churches, voluntary organisations of civil society-in deep waters. Rampant individualism has left people without a higher purpose, and alienated from the shared identity that had formed the bedrock of the social fabric of yesteryear. In place of god, we worship the almighty dollar, and the short-term hedonistic pleasures thus afforded. We do what we do because it pleases us, and not because we feel a responsibility towards one another. However, it has become evident that, in the long term, we are incapable of *being* pleased in this mode of living. On a constant struggle to attain happiness for ourselves, the modern world left us isolated and fragmented. We know not what to do when we hunker for something that cannot be bought or voted for. The consequences: rising levels of psychic distress, loneliness, depression and suicide. The opioid epidemic and widespread alcoholism and use of narcotics are mere symptoms of Man desperately trying to avoid the pain of facing the day without mind-numbing escapism. History shows that civilisations without a shared moral code are bound to fall quickly, which is seen as a bad outcome. The actual way out is, in part, inspired by the wisdom of previous generations. In addition to (or replacing) the *contracts* that govern our lives; e.g. the social contracts in the sphere

of politics and labour contracts in the workplace, we should strive for the formation of *covenants*. What this means precisely is something god only knows. This would save us from the ``I'' thinking that dominates today into collective modes of thought where the ``We'' is central.

Sliding commitments

The book is abound with a wide variety of inspiring stories of successful social workers, politicians, and entrepreneurs, that seem to be meant to invoke a deep sense of hope in combining (often worldly) success with the practical endorsement of principled moral stances. Often, the principles incarnated or stated by these people seem to be fully endorsed by the author. At other times, this commitment is less certain, and seems to contradict other statements. One example of this is the role for morality in society with respect to politics on the one hand, and the free market on the other. On page... , we read that the role of morality is in the domains of human interaction *apart* from these two, i.e. a third pillar in society beyond the reach of the institutions of the other two.

One way to interpret these points is to say that Sacks argues both that we need morality as a branch of human endeavours besides politics and economics, and in addition that the latter need morality to function well. This is all well and good, but it seems to me that we cannot hold that these different interpretations are easily conjoined. Both the market and politics are vigils of manipulation, distortion, and of making deals behind closed doors. We could say that, for the market and politics to function well, *a specific kind* of morality is needed in each of these respective domains. But these domains currently seem to be working perfectly well and as intended. That is to say, with all manners of mechanisms to allow for corporate greed in the one, the systematic avoidance of responsibility in the other, and the clever use of framing devises in both. It seems to me that this characterises the essence and union of representative-democratic politics and neo-liberal capitalism, and to imagine a moral world is to do away with these entirely.

The trouble with much of the book is that it is abound with anecdotes and citations, usually without an actual position being stated clearly and distinctly. For instance, when taken literally, one passage states that two contradictory statements can both be true. This is certainly not the case, as contradictions do not occur in nature. Perhaps the author wishes to express that, although nothing contradictory can be true of our account of physical reality, something different is the case for his project. But does this really further it?

In practical terms, we find little in regards to actual prescriptive assertions in the book. To some extent this is to be expected, as the Rabbi faced the impossible combination of tasks of simultaneously representing an orthodox tradition and writing for a modern audience. For instance, the roles of women in religious organisations, and in general what exactly should be retained of the feminist projects, are topics whose treatment would problematise the author's purposes.

Positive freedom as the domain of morality?

Ever since Isaiah Berlin's distinction between two types of liberty, negative and positive, many have sought to re-interpret these concepts in terms of their own projects. Negative freedom is the ``freedom from'', that is the absence of obstacles for an individual to realise her projects and fulfil her needs. Positive freedom, Sacks argues, is not the providence of politics. Politics, in other words, may take away constraints on individual liberty, but may not impose goals on the individual to instil a ``for''. To say the contrary would be to imply an affirmation of totalitarianism, and North Korea is not our friend.

This distinction reminds me of John Rawls' dichotomy between personally held "substantial" beliefs about how life should be lived, and the liberal political order that allows and defends these. There seem to be serious objections to this cleavage, which can be seen readily when we investigate specific circumstances. Consider a poor young person with an intrinsic will to truth, and a correspondingly a desire to study at a university. The government can give her the means to pursue her studies, as is often done in various forms throughout the globe. It seems to me that this is as much an instance of positive liberty, as well as negative. The state endows her the means to live without want, but also positively encourages her and links up with her personal aspirations.

In all honesty, I think we should all admit that the state both enables and prevents, and the ways in which it does so are amoral because the state itself is amoral, not because the state cannot provide positive freedom. The ultimate statist form of positive freedom is fascism, in which everyone is *merely* a means to "the nation's ends". I think it's fair to say that we, in Western representative democracies, are presently *in part* means to our nation's ends, which at times seem to not go beyond maintaining the very same political order. Nevertheless, it is striking that every new piece of legislation proposed can only be understood in relation to a substantive stance what is constituted by a life well lived, that is it cannot be explained in reference only to take away potential obstacles as in furthering negative freedom. Child benefits, for instance, do remove obstacles for people to have (more) children, but are also to be viewed as the government trying to increase the native population. There is at least a continuous and serious attempt by our governments to appear to link to the electorate's views on what a good life consists of.

The upshot of all this is that it seems to me we cannot claim a separate realm of morality as a realm of the third pillar (i.e. besides or disjoint from politics and the market). Perhaps Sacks meant that we need morality everywhere, but that different discourses require different forms or measures of it. Civil society, his darling child, is then the domain apart from politics and the market in which the full application of morality is appropriate. If this is what he means he might as well have written it.

Of marriage and morals

Marriage and family life take a relatively central place in the Rabbi's analysis. This is because the family unit is an obvious place where children first learn that they are wanted and loved, and where they traditionally obtain much of their moral foundations. This seems to be the first place in the book where the term "covenant" is used as the ideal format for what happens (in this case) between two persons, unifying and integrating the various ways in which the parents cooperate such as sexual interactions, consoling each other, dividing house work (though I'm not sure the Rabbi cooks), etc. It is known that, on occasion, the family unit is also the place where one might ventilate one's frustrations in bodily and verbal actions without the wider world being the wiser, but this seems to have escaped the Rabbi's attention.

The institute of marriage is seen, from a male perspective, as a victory of "weaker" (lower in status) males over the alphas. It is known that in societies where polygamy is widespread, relatively few men get the chance to reproduce. From variation in mitochondrial DNA (which is only passed on maternally) and from variation in Y-chromosomes (which is male-exclusive) we know that over the course of our existence as a species about 80 percent of all females reproduced, versus some 40 percent of males. This seems to be quite a bit fairer than the situation in societies governed by polygamy, Genghis Kahn wouldn't have signed for it. A difficulty here is that population boomed since the agricultural revolution, which allowed for hierarchies to have a large effect on these

numbers with the emergence of this thing called civilisation. I couldn't find the data when restricting the query to hunter-gatherer societies, although a viable thesis is that there was a positive correlation between hunting ability and reproductive success in males.

The author cites research (or at least a conservative work by Murray) indicating that where family life falls apart, as in single parenthood, the probability of behavioural problems in the children increases. I'm not sure what to make of this, but I'm willing to grant him the proposition.

We should be clear, however, on exactly what is stated here. Two parenting figures are better than one (or zero, although I don't think this case is included). We might extrapolate that there is a monotonically increasing function between the number of parenting figures and child welfare over time. This reminds me of the scenario framed in Plato's Republic for the governing and protecting class of society, which is separate from the bulk of society living similarly to what we are used to, that is under the old ball and chain. Within the protectors and governors, husbands, wives, and responsibilities towards children are shared completely communally, although it should be said that couplings are orchestrated by the state in a program of positive eugenics (positive as opposed to projects that try to limit who is to reproduce). Children are raised ignorant of the identities of their biological parents, are to be raised by everyone, and are as such exposed to a wider variety of moral viewpoints in everyday contexts even within the set community.

Although something like this is not at all what I am proposing, it seems to me Plato was up to something regarding the advantages of more distributed relations of care and responsibility. At any rate, this seems to be much more in line with the conditions in which we evolved in bands of hunter-gatherers. For my part I have decided to reject all interactions and relations that lead to envy or jealousy, of which traditional monogamy, given the asymmetrical reproductive strategies in sexual species, seems to be the paradigmatic example in our age. Probably, part of the cause of why secular communes tend to fail is because our society has evolved to especially facilitate the inward-looking construction of the nuclear family. In addition, I have the following argument against both marriage and new-found relations of monogamous cohabitation.

If it is the case that there is someone in this world you deem worthy of being loved, this means that this individual has a certain set of properties (e.g. kindness, intelligence, being blessed with lactation glands) you attribute positive value to. But as it happens, all such human properties are distributed over the total population in a stochastic manner. We can conclude that there will be a great many people with a similar distribution of properties and their respective intensities. It follows that you will also deem these other people worthy of being loved. In combination with statement eight from the points of salt and vinegar below, it is evident that you should be the one to display or realise this love in some constructive way.

Of course, this analysis is very different from what others have made of the calamity of "falling in love". But acting on this oxytocin-fuelled mechanism for pair bonding seems to me giving in to your truly lowest nature. The fact that the drugs in this case are home made does not alter my perception of acts of inebriation.

Against those of Great Distrust and the Saints of Reason alike

Throughout the book, Sacks formulates his position in opposition to two roughly formulated alternative accounts of morality:

- 1) Those with a great distrust in the language, institutes, and frameworks surrounding morality, which include Nietzsche, (some of) the existentialists, and Camus (erroneously labelled by Sacks as an existentialist, referring to himself as an absurdist), and culminating in post-modernist writers.
- 2) Those with a great "faith" in our capacity to use reason alone to come up with a shared moral framework. These enlightenment thinkers include, most famously, Immanuel Kant.

Against Kant, the author seems to state that his notion of the autonomous rational individual is too much to handle for us frail human beings. The categorical imperative is easily stated:

- 1) treat all rational subjects never as merely means, but also always as ends in themselves.
- 2) Act only in accordance with those maxims or potential rules for which a rational being can want them to become universal rules.

Where the second part prohibits lying, for instance, as it would defeat the purpose of lying if it were to become universal, since no one would believe anybody if everyone lied all the time.

The interesting point is made suggesting that Kant thought everyone would end up with exactly the same rules using this recipe, and that this is unreasonable because of different biases in different traditions and cultures (in addition to the fact that there are such things as moral feelings). Be this as it may, I think in practical terms Kant challenges us to get rid of these biases, to obtain a more neutral starting point for constructing our moral system. Dare to think and all that. But according to Sacks it is impossible for an individual to be a morally autonomous (self-governing) being, which is why he rejects Kant's secular version of Lutheran rule oriented (as opposed to "good works" oriented) moral reasoning. Sacks perceives the Lutheran notion of god as a rule-giver in a more positive light, presumably because he believes this absolves the individual from coming up with (or at least positively having to decide on) her own moral beliefs. Concretely this means that the individual implicitly subsumes the beliefs of her community. Whether we see this as a good thing or not is where the Rabbi and I differ.

The author seems to both have respect for and be somewhat daunted by the writings of Nietzsche, who is referred to or quoted about ten times in different places throughout the book. Overall, Sacks' presentation of his ideas is well thought-out, although at one point he suggests the Overman as a political project rather than an unobtainable ideal for the individual. The only explicit criticism of Nietzsche I could find is that his aristocratic ideal in imitation of pre-Socratic Greece is silent on what morality should be like for those who (for some reason or another) are incapable of forming their own. The good Rabbi really does make it his business what others should believe, even if he won't say this explicitly. Contrary to what Sacks seems to think, he shares even more with Nietzsche than his overall approval of him might suggest. The simple fact is that Nietzsche describes several different moralities suitable for different classes. The aristocratic tendency is not merely in the life of the mind either: I seem to remember reading that Nietzsche thought it would always be the case that vast numbers of members of the lower classes formed the material support structure so that the few could have leisure.

Regardless, Sacks is strangely unwilling to directly confront or rebuke the philosopher with the hammer. I would have supposed such an interaction to be a requirement for the Rabbi's project, if his values are to be shown to be hallow rather than hollow.

In Conclusion

There is much left unsaid about the book, not all of which would leave a good aftertaste. The author is all about "leaving room for individual conscience" congruent with defending the liberal order, but forgets that this conscience has the capacity (at times the responsibility) to topple worlds. Thus, inevitably, a conservative frame of mind will be at odds with itself. The author praises the fact that the different religious denominations can come together in ecumenical celebrations with Christian and Muslim leaders, a fact supposedly made possible by the fact that each of these religions do not have to compete for power in a liberal democracy. But let us not forget that this situation is a result of considerable victories of secular over confessional forces. A cursory glance at the relations between religious and governing authorities around the globe today tells us that this happy division of labour is by no means universal.

The work continually refers to historical and social contexts where the "we" has had a more prevalent role than the "I". This is all fair and good, but we should take note of what this historical "We" encompasses. In "the Origins of Political Order", for instance, Francis Fukuyama explains the role of religion in forming increasingly large political and social units. This culminated with the emergence of the world's monotheisms, that managed to break or integrate the tribal and familial ties that operated before into societies that spanned beyond geographical boundaries, albeit still with (or indeed intricately linked to) an understanding of the "Other" in terms of competing religious identities.

The present book is eerily silent on what precisely constitutes the to be constructed "We" that is supposed to save us from ourselves. IN this silence it is clear that, in contrast to the religious "We" that dominated isolated societies in the past, Sacks is looking for some kind of universal identity. In this regard I'm afraid I have to point out that there is no universally shared cultural, religious, or ideological identity today. Simultaneously, modern communication technologies have enabled or enforced a constant exchange of information and ideas between different groups. It follows that we can only attain a shared moral standard in a way that cuts through all the particularities of the disparate groups, and that does away with, or at least sweeps under the rug, all of the peculiarities that have divided us thus far.

It seems the author has similar concerns, for instance in his apprehensive comments about (the idea of) multicultural societies. Of course, the good Rabbi is careful enough not to provide ammunition for those with more explicit programs of ethnic and/or cultural homogeneity. Regardless, we are told that as human beings we thrive most in an environment where the moral code is engrained into our being, so that one need not think about its application.

If it is indeed the case that human beings need this "identity" to function well in a moral sense, and that this is constructed using narratives or stories we tell ourselves (as I fight the urge to vomit my bile), we better come up with stories we can all believe in. But what this means to me is completely different from what it would mean for the Rabbi. To me, a story could be worthy of being believed in if it is universal, abstract, devoid of explicit cultural references and implicit biases, and if it is not obviously constructed to give us some cheap sense of hope or meaning. I also helps hugely if the story has explanatory force. Anyone who has read the book will concur that Sacks has a very

different take. But his does not allow for a shared moral framework for people of very different cultural backgrounds, which is what the world seems to need right now.

The Rabbi believes that once we agree that science is the only domain of knowledge concerning the human condition, the result will be that we will start worshipping science. I'm afraid I don't completely see what this could mean, as science itself certainly does not contain the precept that it should be worshipped (quite the contrary is the case). It has to be said, though, that the marriage of consumerism with the technological *applications* of science often take forms that contain strong religious elements. As technology sufficiently advanced is indistinguishable from magic, and the advertising industry projects a transcendental "We" to convince us that we need their shit, one cannot deny that religious modes of thinking are abound in ostensibly secular societies. And that is a problem.

What's the alternative?

When I first verbally stated my objections to Sack's outright dismissal of (for instance) Ayer's emotivist description of morality, which roughly states that moral pronouncements are declarations of emotional states without cognitive content, my mum was quick to reply something along the lines of "it's easy to criticise without giving an alternative". So let me give my two cents in regards to how a more honest, less provincial, and more ambitious moral framework might be constructed. After this, I will give some guidelines that might serve as salt and vinegar, to rub into opened wounds I hope to have inflicted. Because I am not at home in the society that surrounds me, nor will I be told I should seek to be so.

Cent 1: We can no longer lean on ideological, communitarian, or familial identities even if we were so inclined

Throughout the book, Sacks rejects attempts to base our moral framework on reason alone. He seems to believe human beings have an intrinsic need to belong to some sort of community, to centre ourselves with some kind of group identity. And yet, whenever I imagine the defining features of a specific member of any such group, be they a Southern hill-billy or an Inuit, be they a Wahhabi Muslim or a member of the church of Scientology, be they a university researcher or a politician, my mind is filled with horror for two reasons:

- 1) The extreme poverty of what constitutes these stereotypes in my mind's eye. That is to say, the ways in which these groups can be distinguished from one another using popular memes of what these identities are, are extremely poor in content.
- 2) My absolute failure to imagine an actual and concretely existing individual.

I believe the first fact speaks to the difficulty in forming large-scale unifying inter-group alliances, as something like this would seem to require at least some positive judgement of the members of one group to another and visa versa, if we ignore short-term alliances of mere convenience.

More fundamentally, the second point points to the inability to characterise an individual effectively with a small list of identities. Identities and identity attributions therefore always under-determine

the individual. I can be a man, single, six foot nine, atheist, slightly educated, and broke and knowing this will rarely really allow you to understand my motives. I hope.

This means that moral attitudes towards individuals based on identity attributions must also fail to do justice to individuals.

Cent 2: Moral feelings are a nature-given aspect of social creatures

We are not the first species to display moral behaviour. To a very large degree, this is intrinsic to social creatures in general. All species that live in groups display a level of sociability incompatible with the Hobsian view of the state of nature as a war of all against all. Consider that species that are considered ferocious predators, like lions or piranhas, do not hunt each other willy-nilly. They live together for reasons of safety and for efficiency of resource acquisition and distribution (e.g. sharing the meat of a kill rather than letting it go to waste), and have evolved ways of dealing with inter-individual conflicts that do not (for the most part) involve violence. Although it is hard to find evidence for group behaviour in the very oldest of the fossil records, aspects of this are likely to have evolved (way) before the Triassic period some 240 million years ago. Dinosaurs displaying herd nesting behaviour are known to have lived some 200 million years ago (see 1).

Of course, the forms of social and moral behaviour are more involved in species of higher cognitive resources. It is known, for instance, that elephants and the primates engage in highly cooperative problem-solving.

In these species the fundamental dichotomy between in-group and out-group has reached its highest expression. Indeed, the irony is that the most evolved social organisation is that which allows for the greatest enmity between different groups. It is well documented, for instance, that chimpanzee males raid neighbouring territories to murder members of competing (but usually smaller) groups.

Whether or not we need something like group selection in addition to natural selection on the individual level to explain the emergence of morality is something I'm not sure about. Certainly, I have felt a kind of affinity to my nieces and nephews that I haven't felt with strangers, although similar feelings can easily also result from simply doing things together, as I have experienced while tutoring people.

We need to leverage the capacity for moral feelings and inclinations outside of tribal identities. As a symbolic species, we have steadily increased the conceptual scope and the actual size of the in-group over the millennia, and especially within the last millennium. Nowadays, even the French and the English seem to be able to cooperate occasionally. Now we must figure out how to do this without an out-group. If humanity cannot do this, so much the worse for humanity.

Cent 3: Some immediate objections and responses

Objection 1: One cannot derive an "ought" from an "is". Like Hume said.

Answer: True, but I'm not suggesting that. I state that we can recognise moral behaviour around us as an important natural facet of social beings, without which we could not exist.

Objection 2: Our nature radically under-determines our morality.

Answer: It is true that everything we do is, by definition, consistent with our nature. But not everything we do is consistent with our continued survival. I would deny the Aristotelian view that morality is about human flourishing, that's slightly too strong for me.

Objection 3: Reducing morality with naturalistic explanations robs it of its motivating force

Answer: quite the opposite. Understanding why we do the things we do grounds our actions, this can be seen as a formulation of Spinoza's program of rational self-understanding with a slightly different interpretation of necessity. The motivating force of our moral feelings motivate us because they are, well, feelings. Being told that we are wicked and must abide by the arbitrary judgements of a supernatural being, in contrast, may frighten you into submission but will not offer a positive reward except for egocentric and vain expectations in regards to the hereafter.

Points of salt and vinegar

- 1) Love thy neighbour like you love thyself.
- 2) Do not love yourself, tolerate yourself.
- 3) Do not pass judgement on persons, do so on systems.
- 4) Formulate your moral principles as postulates to be augmented or refuted by experience, and think seventy times seventy times before attributing any solidity to them. Then forget them if at all possible.
- 5) Alienation is the start of societal change; embrace it, feed it, and cherish it.
- 6) Do not ask what your country has done for you, ask what you can do against your country. The borders drawn by the greed and bloodshed of men passed will turn to nothingness with the crumbling into dust of the pages of history.
- 7) Every suggested formation of a covenant (or marginally less mystical, of a contract) is simultaneously an act of attribution of identity to others.
- 8) Expect nothing from anyone but yourself. That way when you are surprised, it will be a pleasant experience.
- 9) I have gazed into the pupils of Another, and saw only the Abyss staring back at me.

Sources:

(1) Rasha Aridi, Paleontologists Unearth the Oldest Evidence of Herd Behavior in Dinosaurs, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/paleontologists-unearth-the-oldest-evidence-of-herd-behavior-in-dinosaurs-180978934/#:~:text=In%20Argentina's%20Patagonia%20region%2C%20scientists,reports%20George%20Dvorsky%20for%20Gizmodo.>