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A Reasoned Ethical Incoherence?*

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How should we consider moral or ethical disagreement?—as a demonstration of ethical relativism, where right and wrong, good and bad, are simply expressions of arbitrary differences? Or as a sign of bad times where people refuse to see what is right and good? Given the pronounced pluralism of our culture, this issue of ethical disagreement penetrates deeply. For not only does it touch such theoretical problems as whether our ethical positions are relative to persons or to culture or instead reflect some absolute in existence, and whether or how our principles and ideals bear on our world; but it also concerns the immediate and practical issue of our attitude toward those who disagree with us. How should Martin the pacifist regard Daniel the revolutionary—as a fool? Or how should Paul, who condemns abortion, consider Judith, who defends it—as evil? perverted? just different?

To deal with these issues we need to recognize with our decade's resurgent idealism the necessity of system, but we also must remember well the limitations of system. We need, in short, a reasoned ethical incoherence. Such an incoherence will be no mere common incoherence, flighty and impulsive, occurring by default rather than as the result of thinking. And it will be no mere paradox either, as when Mao legitimizes adopting "contradictory and strange" alliances with enemies of communism; for these are justified by the systems in which they occur—as when Mao claims that the end justifies the means and that these "contradictions" will further (Maoist) Marxism. No, we will need here neither unthinking nor seeming but *reasoned* incoherence: where our ethical position cannot be fully jus-

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tified by our ethical principles and system; where there are certain stances taken and claims made that cannot be deduced from or justified by the ethical system itself, that are disconnected from the remainder of the system, so that to change their status would not be to alter the status of the other statements in the system; and yet where all this represents no flight from reason but a deep appreciation of it, both its strengths and its limits. Let us see how this is so by examining one form of reasoned incoherence, the doctrine of intraprincipled ethical incoherence.

The key to the doctrine is that the application of our ethical principles and ideals is similar in logic to that of our ordinary directives and concepts. Just what these principles and ideals are and how we come to accept them (in professional parlance, their ontological and epistemological status) will not occupy us here. But what we do with our principles and ideals, how we apply them to the concrete instance, will be the door we seek to open. And the door opened will reveal an intraprincipled incoherence arising out of the logic of our ethical principles—that they are for and against certain matters, somewhat vague, and embrace a set of unordered subprinciples. Relying somewhat on past analyses and results, let us briefly see how we are forced to (1) choose our stance toward our principles, (2) make determinate the concepts and ideals within our principles, and (3) place in a hierarchy our subprinciples.

1. Any general principle, by its logic of being for something, stands against the denials of what it is for. Hence we can act on the basis of a principle by stressing either what it is for or what is against. If we stress what the principle is for, we work *in* the principle: Our reasons justify actions as exemplary of the ideal, as does pacifism. But if we emphasize what the principle is against, we work *to* the principle: Our reasoning justifies actions that obliterate denials of the principle and that promote the likelihood of more people being able to work easily in the principle, as do certain revolutionary principles.¹ To ask which stance—or attitude we adopt toward the principle—is correct not only misses the crucial point that there are an indefinite number of degrees of working in and to principles open to us, but also overlooks that these various options are motivated and justified by the same general principles. For instance, Bradley and Whitehead, Moore and Pap, were motivated by the principle of pursuing understanding. But Bradley and Whitehead chose to live in the principle, developing beautiful and intricate systems exemplifying the ideals of coherence, elegance,

1. Naturally this requires a good deal more argument. I am in each of these three cases of intraprincipled incoherence relying a good deal on past analyses. For a further discussion of this case, see my "Working in and Working to Principles," *Ethics* 83 (1972): 51–57.

completeness, and the like; while Moore and Pap chose to work to the principle, to chisel out crystal-hard analyses cracking to bits any ill-conceived claims. Or again, Gandhi and King, Marx and Berrigan, were motivated by the same general moral principle of furthering the Beloved Community. But Gandhi and King chose to work in the principle—to exemplify love, peace, and trust—while Marx and Berrigan chose to work to the principle, to destroy the denials of love and peace and trust and hence to promote situations—if necessary, at certain times, by means other than those which dwell within the ideals of the principles—where the Community is more feasible and natural to more people. Our principles therefore are ambiguous and support many stances. Here reason departs and forced choice enters.

2. Like most concepts, moral concepts are vague, presenting no sharp boundaries. Rather, as Wittgenstein helped show, our concepts more or less gather together a fund of characteristics on the basis of resemblance or fit. Hence whether this or that characteristic falls under a certain concept cannot always be a matter of discovery but at times must be a matter of decision. For instance, to the question, “Is bouncing a ball a game?” there is no one reply, for general concepts like “game” carry no sharp boundaries. Our ethical concepts are no different. Marking boundaries between a person and a nonperson, killing and letting die, just and unjust punishment, forgiveness and indulgence, censorship and selection, civil and uncivil disobedience, . . . cannot be a matter of discovering ‘the person,’ ‘true killing,’ and the like. Thus searches for “principled . . . solutions to line drawing problems,”² which as the above instances suggest dot our moral lives, often overlook that what may be in question is not what the principles are but what we will determine them to be. Logic here opens up to us a certain range of choice.

3. Any principle of general bearing embraces a cluster of more specific principles or directives. We then face the problem of ordering these more specific subprinciples in a hierarchy. Which ones have priority? Often we are aided by one principle clearly ranking higher than another, as seeking completeness in mathematics usually comes before seeking elegance: We prefer a cumbersome proof to no proof at all. Or, as being honest ranks over being prudent, in general it is better not to advance at all than to advance by cheating. But just as often such accommodating Cartesian clarity does not shine forth. Copernicus and the Ptolemaists, for instance, both followed the principle of advancing scientific knowledge. But Copernicus stressed the subprinciple of developing a coherent system, for his boasted far fewer epicycles than did the Ptolemaists’; while the

2. Feinberg, *The Problem of Abortion* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1973), p. 4.

latter favored the subprinciple of framing a complete system, for they could better account for the orbit of Mars than could Copernicus. Along the same lines, the principle of promoting justice is generally seen as including the subprinciples of rectifying past wrongs and allowing for responsible choice. The first, though, tells us to hire persons of minority classes that have been discriminated against, at least whenever the applicant is as qualified as any other applicant, while the second tells us that we have an obligation to hire the applicants of such minorities if and only if they are more qualified. Hence when a minority and nonminority person of equal qualifications compete for the same job, the subprinciple of rectifying past wrongs obliges the employer to hire the minority applicant and thus conflicts with the subprinciple of responsible choice which offers the employer a choice. As with the pursuit of knowledge, so with the pursuit of justice: The general principle lacks the precision to tell us which subprinciple holds rank. To appeal to a more specific criterion or to make the general criterion more specific would amount to a blatant circularity. For the subprinciple would then be chosen because of its position and not the position because of the principle.

Moreover, whatever we consider the merits of these specific examples—there lurks the danger that I have unluckily chosen a special core case—the point being made bears the burden of no special case that may require further examination. For here we face the logical claim that our reasoning has built-in limits and hence forces us to determine more specifically the full meaning of our ethical position. To help further frame these ideas, let us briefly scrutinize some of the crucial ideas of a singular thinker, say John Rawls, who runs in stark contrast to the spirit of this study by striving to extend reason's grasp into every area of our moral lives. Rawls seeks "to formulate a conception of justice which, however much it may call upon intuition . . . tends to make our considered judgments converge" and thus to "introduce further coherence into our common convictions of justice" (p. 45).³ As opposed to Rawls, this study urges that the ideals of total coherence and universal agreement are misplaced—that we must choose the stance toward our principles, the boundaries of our concepts, the hierarchy of our subprinciples.

We shall find that at the heart of Rawls's position lies another form of incoherence, that between the ideal and the real. This incoherence does not arise out of the logic of our principles—it is not unavoidable—but rather out of the central problem besetting any dualism, that of relating or bringing together two very different

3. All page references will be to John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971).

realms. For Rawls founds his analysis on “ideal theory,” where “strict compliance” with the requirements of justice is assumed as ubiquitous. Rawls does this, not for the sake of simplicity, but because he takes this as essential to his entire analysis. It is not merely that ideal theory provides us with insight into the various ills besetting our society now, but that it grants “the only basis for the systematic grasp of these more pressing problems” (p. 9). Yet Rawls then faces a problem. How can he proceed from conclusions in ideal theory to dicta aiding us in nonideal situations? To be sure, ideal theory will tell us that we do not live in the ideal, perhaps even that society A is better or nearer to the ideal than society B. But seldom is this news. What we want to know is what to do about it. Can the ideal help us here?

For instance, Rawls criticizes the general pacifism of a Gandhi as “an unworldly view bound to remain a sectarian doctrine” (p. 382). And presumably he would extend this judgment to anyone who chose primarily to work in a principle. For what we need, Rawls suggests, is not “a general pacifism but a discriminating conscientious refusal to engage in war in certain circumstances” (p. 382). More specifically, if the governments of the world are “in some circumstances so likely to be unjust,” it may be that “in the foreseeable future we must abjure military service altogether” (p. 381). But first how can Rawls justify these claims? Not by appeal to ideal or even to nearly ideal theory; for after all, we are speaking of war, the general breakdown of society and contract. Second, even assuming that we find some justification in ideal theory—some strange meta-contract concerning the breakdown of contract, as incoherent as that sounds—how do we move from the ideal to our world, the real one? For even in that strange meta-contract we enjoy full compliance, at least on the meta-level—a compliance we almost completely lack in our world. So Rawls is speaking from the standpoint of the ideal about a radically nonideal situation without telling us how to bridge the gap. And finally, a cursory glance at Rawls’s remarks concerning pacifism will tell us how little has been said. For even a staunch pacifist like Gandhi could accept what Rawls suggests, adding simply that all earthly circumstances are so likely to be unjust that we must abjure military service altogether. The claims are so general as to be vaporous.

Accordingly, Rawls faces three problems in his remarks about our world from his pinnacle of ideal theory—those of justification, transfer, and helpfulness. Nor is Rawls unaware of these difficulties. He seeks to deal with them in part through discussing “the special case of a nearly just society, one that is well ordered for the most part but in which some serious violations of justice nevertheless do occur” (p. 361; cf. pp. 382, 386). Rawls thus, like the Cartesians of old,

offers a bridge entity, spirits in the pineal gland, to make the gap between the two worlds less drastic. But as Descartes found out about spirits in the petite gland so we will find about the nearly just society, that an intermediary device seeking to span two drastically disparate situations must fall on one side or t'other. While Descartes's suggestion settled on the side of the body out of the influence of will and mind, Rawls's nearly just society hovers on the side of the ideal, of slight concern to our world. For Rawls makes amply clear that the "violations" he speaks of in the nearly ideal society, although serious, are not that serious. In discussing civil disobedience, for instance, he tells us that "vindictive repression of legitimate dissent is unlikely" and that there "are not likely to be many groups similarly entitled to engage in this form of dissent" (p. 375). By this clearly (and alas!) no major society today counts as nearly just—or even as almost nearly just. Hence the nearly just society fails to bridge the gap between the ideal and the real.

Indeed we can now see more clearly the dilemma facing Rawls. If he speaks of our society he may provide some helpful direction, but at the price of discussing a world so far removed from the ideal that his claims will remain unjustified. Yet if he speaks of the ideal or the nearly ideal he may, on the basis of ideal theory, be able to justify what he says but at the cost of saying little or nothing about our world, the real one. Or, to return to Rawls's discussion concerning war and pacifism, if the ideal reflects our world, say by some strange meta-contract concerning the complete collapse of all contracts, it may apply to our lives in war, but how then can it rate as ideal theory? Yet if the ideal is ideal in its insistence on full compliance and the like, perhaps its own internal coherence will provide its main justification. But how then can it apply to our world?

In seeking to deal with such difficulties, Rawls admits that in the "more extreme or tangled instances of nonideal theory" we will reach a point where "the priority of rules for nonideal cases will fail" (p. 303). There comes a time when ideal theory simply does not apply. But this only presents us with a challenge, Rawls continues, "to postpone the day of reckoning as long as possible and try to arrange society so that it never comes" (p. 303). What Rawls seeks to do, in other words, is substitute for the theoretical problem of tying the ideal to the real the practical one of so arranging society along the theoretical guidelines of ideal theory that we never run up against such extreme and tangled instances, that we have the ideal at least nearly operative in the real. But such a directive of course is inherently circular. For Rawls's problem concerns bringing to bear the ideal in our world. And this problem itself is a particular facet of the problem we face in our lives and not just in this paper, namely, to determine how we should apply our own ethical principles. How

do we untangle our situation when our principles themselves are ambiguous with regard to stance, vague with regard to boundaries, unordered with regard to subprinciples? To tell us, as Rawls does, that we should so arrange our lives that we do not have the problem of relating the ideal and the real, is to tell us next to nothing. For it tells us what we already know—that we need the ideal to be real—and remains silent about what we do not but want desperately to know—how to make the ideal real.

Finally, even in the unattained but nearly just society we meet intraprincipled incoherence. For here Rawls maintains that “principles that straightway decide actual cases are clearly out of the question” (p. 389). He thereby insists that individual decision within the relevant perspective of theory cannot be avoided: “each person must make his own decisions. . . . We cannot divest ourselves of our responsibilities and transfer the burden of blame to others” (p. 389). But it is just here, where Rawls’s analysis ends in individual decision, that our discussion and so many of our major moral issues begin. Since even in the nearly ideal society there are serious violations of justice, what stance toward the principle of justice should we adopt? And how should we delineate our key concepts—from civil disobedience to moral person? Accordingly we find Rawls advising us on how to deal with vague concepts in the nearly just society, that they are “best discussed in the context of definite moral problems” in the hope that “the specific issue and the structure of the available general facts may suggest a fruitful way to settle them” (p. 509). Indeed we find Rawls moving to the specific in implicitly revealing an incoherence—again within nearly ideal situations at worst—related to the one we earlier discussed concerning subprinciples of justice. Rawls recognizes “the considerations singled out by the principle of redress . . . that undeserved inequalities call for redress” (p. 100). Yet he also holds that within a nearly just society the claims of “the more fortunate . . . are legitimate expectations established by the social institutions” (p. 103). Hence we confront the necessity of ranking the principles of redress and of legitimate expectation. No priority rules aid us here. For the various priority rules concern the initial distribution of fair measure—whether it be of liberty or of goods—and not the rectification of unfair measure. So even in the nearly ideal society we cannot avoid these difficult choices.

Consequently we must search out ideas and methods to help us deal with the unavoidable incoherence we meet in our own very nonideal society. To help orient our search, let us say that we begin with a morality, a practice with undeniable and specific obligations and values ranging over all facets of our lives; that in making sense of this dimension we articulate an ethics, a system of principles—as, say, found in contractarianism—designed to organize and partially

justify our moral lives; and that in considering ethical reasoning in general, as this study attempts, we do meta-ethics which, aside from a general commitment to the moral, aims to be as neutral as possible to the various principles of ethics. Accordingly, when we are forced by intraprincipled incoherence to determine what our ethical principles or reasons are to be, we are engaged in formulating an ethics and thus face what may be called ethical choice. Just what experientially constitutes ethical choice—whether it is best characterized as voluntaristic, arbitrary, intuitive, or whatnot—will for this study remain open. For here we focus on the logic, presuppositions, and consequences of ethical choice.

At any rate we can complete our ethical position only by making choices, which we see now as embracing not only our ethical principles but also the determinations we make by ethical choice to complete the meanings of our principles. Such choices obviously are to be distinguished from moral choices, where we must choose between an already determined right and wrong, and less obviously from moral dilemmas, where we face competing principles of apparently equal strength. While moral dilemmas speak of forced choices between conflicting principles, ethical choices indicate areas where we must choose a specific meaning for these very principles. For instance, we have seen the pursuit of justice confront Rawls with the ethical choice of ordering the subprinciples of redress and legitimate expectation in order to determine just what his system of principles is. But in our attempt to obey the principle of redress we meet the dilemma concerning which group to focus our limited resources on—women, blacks, Chicanos? Here our principles are determined and it is now our task to apply them. The difference then between ethical choices and moral dilemmas is one between incompleteness *in* reason, where our reasons are undetermined, and incompleteness *of* reason, where our reasons underdetermine.

Philosophy consequently helps us to be moral—not only by helping us to organize our moral lives through a set of ethical principles, but also by making clear to us that in order to complete those principles, with their accompanying values and obligations, we must make the ethical choices that are needed to determine just what they will be. In demanding that we complete those principles, moreover, we are offering no false ideal. For without our ethical choices completing the meanings of our principles we will lack a moral position in certain crucial cases. Here then we meet a new ethical principle making clear an old moral obligation: to complete the meanings of our ethical principles by ethical choices. Such an obligation may be called one of ethical responsibility, a meta-moral responsibility in that it is a precondition to, and hence about, certain other moral obligations. For before we can have moral responsibility, the re-

sponsibility to choose what is right and avoid what is wrong, we must have a right and a wrong. But this in turn often demands, as we have amply seen, that we fulfill our ethical responsibility by making the ethical choices that complete the meaning of our principles. Such choices deeply trouble us: They are demanding, thrusting on us responsibility rather than necessity; bewildering, confronting us with myriad options as opposed to the one true path; and, from the point of view of our principles, incoherent in that it is we and not the principles or their systems determining what holds. But also such choices and the obligations to make them must be deemed reasoned and not irrational, for they necessarily emerge out of the limits of our reason.

So what should we do? One tendency is to embrace a single position, so clear and bright, heroically holding off all opposing onslaughts. But to so view oneself, as an Achilles of thought, is—dare I say it?—to neglect the heel just exposed. For we do not have the hero's understanding, if only because we lack the clarity of the staged world. We live in neither the ideal nor the nearly ideal. Yet another tendency is to embrace a relativism, holding that all positions are equally acceptable. But this would reject the staged world for no world. That our principles are incompletely determined does not mean that they are totally undetermined. We have at least our rough-and-ready principles and ideals. So again we ask, What should we do? Perhaps it might help here to consider briefly what we have done. As Locke reminded the Aristotelians that logic did not begin with the Master's formulations, so we must remind ourselves that our rationality here is practiced, that it lies implicit in our day-to-day decisions. It cannot be overstressed, of course, that our practice as presented here is illustrative and not argument—the argument will come later—and that the practice will be portrayed as a rational reconstruction and not history. But by briefly scrutinizing some of our actions we will be seeking both to lock ourselves into the practical and to expose an implicit rationality. In so doing we shall find an emphasis on concrete cases as well as an attempt to heed the conflicting demands of both variety and order.

First, then, our moral perspective in reasoned incoherence is in part one of considering competing examples: If instances are to be treated as similar, at least the differences have been urged.⁴ So regarding abortion, for instance, we heed the nature of the conceptus at its various stages from conception to birth; we compare and con-

4. Again I rely on past analyses to develop this point. For the thinker who is influencing me here—and whom indeed I am paraphrasing in this paragraph—see Edward H. Levi's too-neglected work *An Introduction to Legal Reasoning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), esp. pp. 1–10, 17–18, 21–22, 30–31, 58–60, 103–4.

trast abortion to self-defense and euthanasia; we scrutinize any differences between legally permitting and state funding of an abortion; and so on. Here we can rely on no overriding theory, for we are determining in part what the theory is by deciding what instances fit under what principles. No specific situation or overarching claim announces that this similarity or difference, this item, is decisive. Yet we do not stand bereft of considerations. For we, the present moral agents, seek to see the moral sphere as a whole, attempt to embrace and make determinate all the relevant principles and considerations. Such an attempt, then, hardly means the end of argument. But what we need is a greater realization of the focus of the argument—that we remain rooted in the particular and in our own central role as characterized by ethical choice.

Moreover, we seek to balance the conflicting demands of both variety and order. In the first place, we tolerate a diversity not only among ourselves but also within our own personalities. Recall for example, how many own handguns and yet would vote against such legal ownership; or how HEW demands preferential hiring of minorities yet often consigns these demands to the care of benign neglect; or how the celebrated Dr. Edelin was convicted of manslaughter, which is punishable by up to twenty years in prison, and yet received a mere one-year suspended sentence, thereby greatly relieving the jury that convicted him! At first glance we can make only nonsense of such tensions: a pacifist gun owner, a hypocritical institution, foolish jurists, a judge flouting justice by an absurd leniency.⁵ But to so view such representative tensions is to forget that they essentially mark us as moral beings, beings in part defined by the profound freedom of ethical choice. Some choose to work to the principle of pacifism and stand willing to shoot murderers, as Quakers have supported capital punishment, but just as legitimately choose to work in pacifism by voting to abolish the legal handgun, as Quakers have refused to war. Some, like HEW, choose to order the criteria of justice by ranking the rectification of past wrongs over allowing for responsible choice, yet recognize implicitly, in a sometimes relaxed vigil, that this ordering is not the only ordering. And the jury convicting Edelin ethically chose to consider as a person the aborted fetus—hence the verdict of guilty—yet recognized that Edelin ethically chose not to so view the fetus—hence their relief. In these rational reconstructions, in sum, we find an attempt to allow for ethical choice, both within ourselves and within others. But in the second place we also see in these instances that an equal insistence on restraint, again both personal and public, complements

5. See, for instance, Seth Mydans, "When Is an Abortion Not an Abortion?" *Atlantic* (May 1975), pp. 71–73.

this willingness to accept diversity. Not anyone can carry a gun or be declared a conscientious objector. In its sometime neglect, HEW reveals a restraint toward those who order the subprinciples of justice differently, yet in its frequent enforcement of its guidelines places corresponding demands on those who disagree. The judge in his lenient sentence reflects the view of restraint toward Edelin that the jury, in spite of its severe sentence, so much wanted.⁶

Accordingly we seek to respect ethical choice both by permitting the diversity it brings and also by restraining this diversity through compromise. And for good reasons. We tolerate diversity not only because by and large we cannot condemn it but also because we are indeed morally obligated to appreciate it. Yet we must restrain this diversity out of respect for morality, the moral community, and the moral person.

For how can we condemn those who make different ethical choices than “we” do? Not on the basis of inconsistency. For these rational reconstructions portray no one as abandoning standards: the handgun owner acts on the basis of pacifism—in the one instance on what will best work to it and in the other on what best exemplifies or works in it; HEW acts out of justice, respecting both compensatory justice and personal responsibility; the jury, the judge, and Edelin all act out of respect for persons; and so on. Nor, though, can we condemn on the basis of immorality. For the ethical principles are followed assiduously, not one is denied. We cannot favor a “side” as reflecting the one true way—say that we should work to pacifism or declare the conceptus a person or hold that responsible choice ranks over rectifying past wrongs—without being blatantly circular. Accordingly, tensions and not contradictions, personal and social struggles and not hypocrisy or backsliding, mark these instances.

Moreover we should seek not to condemn here, as we are so wont to do, but to appreciate. For we are dealing with persons com-

6. Two other instances may help here. Gandhi the vegetarian found he could not work completely in that principle, that to his great disquiet he had to drink milk. For vegetarianism, like any ethical principle, forces us to choose a stance toward it, so that a Gandhi may choose to curtail his complete indwelling in that principle in order to promote the ideals embedded in it in other ways. Or Justice Holmes, discussing how ignorance concerns guilt, distinguished between ignorance of fact and ignorance of consequences, where ignorance of fact is based on “the actual condition of the defendant’s consciousness” and so for Holmes is to be treated more leniently than is failure to foresee a consequence, which is “determined by the standard of the prudent man” and thus does not tolerate gross ignorance. But a concept like guilt lacks absolute distinctions, so that a Holmes might indeed have legitimately reversed his policy and based ignorance of fact on prudence; yet more often than not, when we come down hard in one area, as Holmes does regarding ignorance of consequences, we curb our blow in another, as he does in ignorance of fact (Oliver Wendell Holmes, *The Common Law* [Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1881], p. 56).

mitted just as deeply as we are to the moral perspective. Yet this perspective tells us in part to act on the basis of certain principles—e.g., utilitarian, perfectionist, contractarian—which themselves require completion. Hence to be moral is not just to follow principles but also to determine their full meanings. Only in this way, as we have already remarked, can we have a complete set of values and obligations. Consequently to reject the differences which result from these legitimate ethical choices as demonic, or depraved, or dumb, is to deny a crucial component in our moral lives. It is to deny that our principles require personal determination and thereby is to undermine the very morality to which we are so committed.

Furthermore, even though we must acknowledge and appreciate at times very different ethical positions from our own, namely, those positions resulting from different ethical choices, this does not deny the force of our own position. For one fundamental result of ethical choice is the insight that we do not live on one moral level, where we view our ethical position as the only legitimate one, but that we must also accept and live within a meta-ethical level—one that addresses and seeks to make intelligible the multifarious variety of ethical positions. On this meta-ethical level we discover that ethical positions different from our own are not necessarily evil, perverted, or stupid. And on this level we learn to appreciate the partial openness of principles and the consequent choice-making power of all moral agents. Such an appreciation calls for respect for, and restraint in the face of, the various choices of others, who are, after all, fulfilling their moral being by filling out their ethical positions in making these choices. But since this appreciation occurs at the meta-ethical level, it does not call for any servile acceptance of the decisions of others. For appreciation is a multiedged sword cutting not just for others but also for ourselves. Hence we too will demand that all other moral agents appreciate our position as well.

Thus only to some extent should ethical choice be allowed. Based as it is on a commitment to morality and to the principles which express morality, ethical choice demands respect for persons—an ideal embedded in various ways in our moral principles. But such respect requires that the moral purview of each person be given a weight, that all persons can rightfully believe that their decisions and ethical choices count. For being respected means being taken seriously, and this in general translates into being effective. Yet one crucial way we experience ourselves as effective is to see our ethical position figure in societal policy. This of course does not mean that our position is necessarily followed, but it does mean that it exercises a force in the final policy. Nor does this mean that each person has political force, thereby committing us to a liberal view of society and thus tainting the neutrality of this study. For the force we

speak of here is *moral*, where one's moral being must be seen as counting in the community—a face that is as central to a Marx as it is to a Locke.

And again, to see the need for restraint from one other vantage point, we are not dealing here with one person but with many, bound together in a moral community. Yet such a community grounds our morality—teaching it, reinforcing it, providing it with many, some say all, of its ingredients. Hence we should take care that the diversity we tolerate in the name of morality does not destroy one cornerstone of that morality, the moral community. Accordingly, while offend one another we will—ethical choice guarantees that much—our commitment to morality, the moral community, and the moral person demands that we seek to mitigate these mutual offendings by a sympathetic restraint.

We have in effect a new ethical principle making clear another old moral obligation: to develop a society which allows for the greatest possible ethical choice and at the same time promotes the deepest sense of moral concern. This itself is not justified by any specific ethics but carries a meta-ethical justification. It follows from respect for the ethical principles themselves—calling for the completion of our morality, the preservation of our moral community, the assurance of all moral agents that their ethical choices count. Since it concerns the logical preconditions of any ethical principle—the kinds of choices that are required to complete the meaning of any ethical principle—it thereby has priority over any individual principle. As stated, of course, it too demands completion, from determining one's stance toward it to delineating and ordering its ideals and subprinciples. But as stated, it asks for a broad search for that variety coupled with restraint that best reflects respect for morality, moral persons, and the moral community.

What such a society will be is yet to be determined, is in the making now. Theoretical generalizations, as we have amply seen, will not work. But outlawing or permitting all abortions, condemning all benign neglect as racist, or proposing such neglect as an across-the-board policy—such postures will not serve. For they deny the force of ethical choice. To be sure, such claims as these are unhelpful if we seek tidy principles “to draw the lines.” But we have argued here that there are no such principles, that it is a matter of logic that our principles are somewhat undetermined. Whatever our principles may be, whether there is one true principle or many equally acceptable ones, does not bear on this conclusion—that the principles, whatever they may turn out to be, must be completed by ethical choices. Hence we must adopt a new attitude toward these issues and the deep differences which characterize them. And it is just here that ethical choice enters by specifying and justifying a new

mode of dealing with disagreement—one of acceptance and appreciation. Instead of seeking to draw the line by the one true ruler, which leads us into a vicious labeling of those who disagree with us as perverted or whatnot, we shall seek to understand and compromise. Consequently restraint and compromise appear not just as a practical policy, to appease others and get along, but also as a moral policy, to respect the logical presuppositions of all ethical principles and thus to respect morality itself.

In conclusion, to demand uniformity in the name of consistency is to deny morality in the name of morality. All-or-nothing approaches that seek *the* ethical position for society hurt rather than help. For in our pluralistic society especially we need desperately to distinguish fundamental or moral disagreement, a Solzhenitsyn against a Stalin, from subtle or ethical disagreement, a King against a Berrigan. We have moral disagreement when we meet the denials of our principles and the ideals embedded in them, as Stalin's interrogators denied everything dear to morality. But we have ethical disagreement when we meet differences resulting from the various options offered to us by our ethical principles. The former marks our stands as moral beings, the latter our legitimate ethical choices. Both sorts of disagreement will be with us always, but one is unyielding, offering no compromise, condemning a Munich as a sellout; while the other must yield, must compromise, on pain of morality tearing itself apart.