

# Can political philosophy be neutral?

CHARLES TAYLOR

"Linguistic Analysis" as a method in philosophy has given many a new twist to traditional questions. But philosophers of this school sometimes present their work as a radical break with the past, with its fruitless questions and sterile answers, and as an entirely new approach which will change the face of philosophical enquiry. This "new look" is very much in evidence in the field of moral and political philosophy.

One of the most startling signs of the change is that the "analyses" made of moral and political theories are supposed to be themselves neutral, that they are not meant at all as interventions in the debate between different moralities or political beliefs, but that, on the contrary, one can accept them as true without taking sides in this debate at all. These "analyses" are, in short, not moral theory in the traditional sense, but fall into the category of "ethics" which is interpreted as a study of the language of moral and political theory.

But how can a study of this kind be neutral? This is explained to us by the distinction between factual and evaluative statements. This distinction is basic to the moral and political philosophy of linguistic analysis.

It has been brought to the fore by what has been called the argument against the Naturalistic Fallacy.

This argument, which has been summed up in the succinct slogan, "no ought from is", is intended to be simply a *logical* thesis. That is, it is supposed to deal exclusively with the logical force and cogency of certain standard arguments used in the realm of morals and politics. Thus, no number of statements of fact, the thesis runs, can entail an evaluative statement. By this latter expression is meant any statement which is used to put a value on something (e.g. "this is good", "that is unjust"), or which contains words which have evaluative connotations (e.g. "liberty", "peace", "exploitation") or which prescribes some action for us (e.g. "you *should* do this", "it is our duty to do that"). Such evaluative statements can only be deduced from premises which themselves contain at least one evaluative statement; they are in a different logical universe from statements of fact.

Thus any argument of the form "such-and-such is the case, therefore we should do so-and-so" is automatically declared invalid. If the conclusion is a moral statement,

## Can political philosophy be neutral?

the premise must be one, too. Nor can we overcome this gap between fact and value by any kind of intensive research, for it does not arise from a chance limitation of knowledge, but from a truth of logic. Prescriptions or moral statements would cease to be such if they were founded on facts.

In other words, our moral and political beliefs can never be said to have factual grounds, even though we may sometimes have this illusion, for the facts themselves are "neutral". We may ourselves put what value we like on the things that make up the world, on people, on political institutions, on certain kinds of acts, but we can find no grounds for our choices in the world itself. These choices cannot be made right or wrong by any events whatever. They can only be shown to be inconsistent with other choices, and this may worry some people, but they can never be shown to conflict with the facts.

Now this analysis of the language of morals and political theory, into "valueless" statements of fact on one hand, and expressions of preference which have no factual content on the other, is itself supposed to be neutral, i.e. compatible with any moral position whatever. But right away we can see that there is at least one sense in which it is not. The claim to neutrality is plausible because, for instance, people of widely differing political opinions can usually agree on a certain commonly acceptable description of controversial political events. We might say what divides them is simply their several evaluations of these events. A reporter could put it this way and still remain neutral. But if he goes on to say that these "evaluations" can add nothing to the description, can have no factual content, then he has stepped beyond the bounds of common agreement.

For this is clearly a framework that is more congenial to some values than to others. To a liberal, for instance, who holds this or that political opinion, but wishes above all to stress that this is merely his personal view, and that he has no right to consider it more correct than any one else's, this theory of ethics is absolutely unexceptionable. But how about those who believe that our moral and political views are the merest caprice if they are not grounded in some objective reality? Is it really possible, e.g. for a Marxist or a Christian to squeeze his morality into this framework, and admit simply that he holds the views he does in fundamentally the same way as his preference for stout over bitter? One of the principal claims of Marxism is that the political action it endorses is, in its general lines, established by a study of man in society—in particular of Capital or men as they are in the economic and social relations of capitalist society. The linguistic analysis cannot be applied to this theory without destroying it. Similarly: "This is God's will" is meant as a factual statement, but it can hardly be said to be devoid of moral implications. It is "neutral" only to non-believers. To believers it is even decisive.

That the linguistic theory is not neutral, in this sense, is, of course of no importance, if its analysis is correct. Because then all theories which do not fit the framework are so much nonsense in any case. The analysis will still be neutral between all intelligible moral views.

## "Inarticulate major premises"

But when we come to examine it, there is a perplexing ambiguity about the linguistic theory. The analysis of the language of morals is only meant to yield certain statements about the logical relations of the expressions used, which seems anodyne enough. But the results have widespread and far-reaching ramifications for all our thinking about moral or political questions. But, even more perplexing, these ramifications are themselves tinged with ambiguity. In fact the analysis could lead us to a kind of antinomianism, a rejection of all evaluation as "unreal". Or it could lead us to a new foundation for liberalism: No man's values can be shown to be "better" than any other man's. The absolute right of each man to choose his own values for himself finds decisive support from an unexpected quarter.

But talk of this kind sounds rather queer in the context of linguistic philosophy. This is because we have already left the level of logical analysis and are rummaging around among the "inarticulate major premises" of the theory. And these deserve more attention than has been given them in the past. Let us try to explore the first ambiguity.

It is not possible to remain at the purely formal level, at the level of talk about language. To say something about language is to say something about the world. This we can see if we ask ourselves, how can the study of the "logic of moral language" have such important results for morals? How can we discover that there is a gap between fact and value by a simple examination of language? The answer is that we can't. Language is not simply a brute fact in the world which we have to take account of, it is also something that *we* speak. Before we can talk about the logic of language, we must make clear *whose* language we are talking about. If there is a gap between fact and value, it is not because this is written in the logic of the language that we all in fact speak;—some of us persist in speaking a language in which all statements of fact are not devoid of moral implications—it must be because the proper language in which to describe or explain the world is a "valueless" one. Now this latter thesis is not a thesis about the logic of language. And yet it is the key assumption of linguistic ethical theory. The ambiguity of a logical theory with moral implications is resolved. The logical theory itself follows from a metaphysical theory which conditions our whole approach to moral or political questions.

## A purge of value concepts?

This metaphysical theory is rooted largely in the scientific tradition of our civilization and we find a forceful statement of it, for instance, in the writing of Descartes. But it is not, for all that, a patent truth or a tautology, as some people have said. It is an open question whether the correct language in which to talk about man must always be one purged of value concepts. Far from being a tautology, this thesis is more radical than some of its protagonists will allow.

For, as was mentioned above, the results of the logical analysis of moral language remain ambiguous in another way as well. If the correct language in which to describe facts is one which has no value implications, is it possible to go on speaking of moral decisions at all? If we say, for instance, that the moral subject

chooses moral principles, can we always describe his activity without, at the same time, evaluating it? If we want to call a moral decision a decision made in accordance with a principle which we have accepted, then can we report an action of this kind in entirely neutral terms? If we can, then what meaning do we put on the word "moral"? What do we mean by a *moral* choice? The ambiguity is, as it were, concentrated in the answer to these last questions. From the point of view of the sociologist, who wants to describe without evaluating, a moral decision is differentiated from other decisions by certain criteria of social custom or behaviour. The sociologist states these criteria, he doesn't judge them. But for the man who has to take a decision, which he holds to be a moral one, that which differentiates this choice from others, cannot itself be morally indifferent. For some people the *matter* of the decision is the determining factor. If the decision is about a certain kind of thing—political liberty, personal integrity, etc.—then it is a moral one. For these people, this kind of thing cannot be described completely in terms which are free of moral implications. They will not hold that the "neutral" sociologist's description is complete, for then there is no longer any reason to call this or that particular decision moral. But for others, it is the *form* of the decision that counts. A moral decision is one made according to a universalisable principle, freely assented to, and so on. For these latter, what a decision is about may be a matter of indifference, but they too cannot in all consistency hold that the sociologist's description is complete. For there are certain events in the world which they, too, cannot describe without evaluating, viz. moral decisions. If we wish to adopt a formalist Kantian stand-point and say that certain decisions commonly thought of as moral are not really so, on the grounds that they are not taken according to some maxim which their authors wish to be universally accepted, are we really just "reclassifying" without evaluating? Can we consistently say that "unprincipled" is, for us, a term without value connotation?

### Linguistic analysis: an internal contradiction

The ambiguity of the linguistic analysis of moral language lies in the fact that it tries to use "moral" to mean both what the sociologist means and what the man who takes a moral choice means. But we can't use the word both ways at once. We can either say that the specific nature of moral choice lies in some factors that are not themselves morally indifferent, or we can reduce it, putting it on the same level as other kinds of choice and differentiating it only by certain neutral criteria. But then, in the second case, we are dealing with a different concept. We cannot have it both ways.

If we opt for the latter usage as being the "true" one we are led to a kind of antinomianism. If we opt for the former then linguistic philosophy appears as a new defence of liberalism—the right of the individual to choose his own morality is the highest value. But this

defence is perhaps not so new. For once the ambiguities have been cleared away, it can no longer be upheld by seemingly irrefutable logical doctrines. The fact-value distinction no longer operates all round. The individual's moral choices are not just "valueless" events like the other facts and events of this world.

There is thus an internal contradiction in the linguistic theory. On the one hand it reposes on the arbitrary acceptance of an ethically neutral language as the "real" descriptive language. On the other hand it strives to avoid the general holocaust of values to which this premise must lead. The traditional values of liberalism seem to enjoy a certain indemnity. The dilemma that arises from these two incompatible aims is perhaps the traditional dilemma of liberalism: How to undermine the moral and political views that challenge the in-prescriptible right of the individual to choose whatever values he wishes without undermining the basis of this right itself. In the logical distinction between fact and value the linguistic philosophers have found a framework which can exclude, for example, Marxism and Christianity. But this framework also excludes everything but antinomianism, and this is not always what its authors wished to do.

\* \* \*

The dilemma can be kept in the background if we forget that the world to be described must also include the subject of this world—man. If we hold the moral subject apart from the world, then we can say that the facts are neutral, and still talk of moral choices. Descartes for instance, could have his non-teleological universe cheaply because the "soul" i.e. the moral subject, was not part of it. But this view is generally considered untenable nowadays. The world may appear "neutral" until we realize that moral choices and actions are events in this world. Then we must decide—either we opt for a world that is not completely describable in terms purged of value-content, or we choose to reject the word "moral" except as a classifying term in sociology.

The moral and political philosophy of linguistic analysis is not neutral, even in the sense that it is compatible with all intelligible moral or political opinions. It is itself one such opinion among others. It is not the umpire between different views checking the logical fouts but one of their ideological competitors. It reposes on a certain view of the world as they do, and its use of the term moral is correspondingly different, as theirs are, one from another. The analysis of moral language has given a contribution to philosophy in that it has unmasked the sophistry which consists in assuming without debate a certain moral terminology as *the* correct one and deducing prescriptions from it. But it is in danger of being used itself for a similar purpose. If the language of the intuitionists is not *the* language, how can we be so sure that the "neutral" language must be. The question of which language to use remains open. And on this question one can only be neutral by remaining silent.