



Bob Brecher

IDEAS

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GETTING WHAT YOU WANT?

A Critique of
Liberal Morality



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GETTING WHAT YOU WANT?

Bob Brecher, in this brilliantly articulated book, claims that it is wrong to think that morality is simply rooted in what people want. Brecher explains that in our consumerist society, we make the assumption that getting 'what people want' is our natural goal, and that this 'natural goal' is a necessarily good one. We see that whether it is a matter of pornography or getting married—if people want it, then that's that. But is this really a good thing? Does it even make sense?

Getting What You Want? offers a critique of liberal morality and an analysis of its understanding of the individual as a 'wanting thing'. Brecher boldly argues that Anglo-American liberalism cannot give an adequate account of moral reasoning and action, nor any justification of moral principles or demands. Ultimately, Brecher shows us that the whole idea of liberal morality is both unattainable and anyway incoherent.

Getting What You Want? is an invaluable read for anyone interested in contemporary issues of morality, as well as for students of philosophy, politics and history.

Bob Brecher teaches philosophy at the University of Brighton. He is also editor of *Res Publica*, a journal of legal and social philosophy.

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GETTING WHAT YOU WANT?

A critique of liberal morality

Bob Brecher



London and New York

First published 1998
by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2003.

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Brecher, Robert

Getting what you want?: a critique of liberal morality/Bob Brecher
p. cm.—(Ideas)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Ethics. 2. Desire (Philosophy). 3. Liberalism—Moral and ethical aspects. I. Title. II. Series: Ideas (Routledge (Firm)).

BJ1012.B64 1997
171'.2—dc21 97-7484

ISBN 0-203-00774-3 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0-203-21024-7 (Adobe eReader Format)
ISBN 0-415-12951-6 (hbk)
ISBN 0-415-12952-4 (pbk)

In memory of my father

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe a variety of debts to friends and colleagues whose support, encouragement and engagement made it possible for me to write this book. Christopher Cherry, Gregory Elliott, Pat FitzGerald and Graham McFee all made valuable comments on considerable portions of draft versions of the first five chapters; Tim Chappell, Eve Gerrard and Steve Wilkinson helped with Chapter 6. To Carol Jones and Jonathan Rée I am especially grateful: to Carol for indefatigably commenting on successions of entire drafts and discussing much of the material in detail and at length; to Jonathan for both his early support of the project and his meticulous, rigorous and kind-hearted editorship. It has been a pleasure and a privilege to work with him. The book which has resulted would have been much the poorer, if it had materialized at all, without the perspicuity and patience of these people. Thanks go also to Jill Grinstead, Tom Hickey, Elizabeth Kingdom, Graham Laker, Marcus Roberts and Linda Webb; and particularly to Jo Halliday. I am fortunate at the University of Brighton to work with generous colleagues and several 'generations' of committed students whom it would be invidious to single out: for their intellectual challenge and their patience over the years, I am extremely grateful. I have also tried out some of the ideas that follow at Philosophy Society meetings at Aberystwyth, Brighton, Cardiff, East Anglia, Manchester, Middlesex, Sussex and Warwick; and at several conferences of the Association for Legal and Social Philosophy, Royal Institute of Philosophy and Society for Applied Philosophy as well as at a series on liberalism at J.E.Purkyne University in the Czech Republic. I am indebted to everyone concerned, especially those who disagreed.

I should like to thank the staff of the University of Sussex library for their unfailing helpfulness; and my editors at Routledge for being

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

so pleasant to work with. Finally, my thanks to the editors and publishers of the following papers, on which I have drawn for some of the material in Chapter 8: 'Surrogacy, liberal individualism and the moral climate', in J.D.G.Evans (ed.), *Moral Philosophy and Contemporary Problems*, Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987; 'Illiberal thoughts on "page 3"', in Gary Day (ed.), *Readings in Popular Culture*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1990; 'Organ transplants: donation or payment?', in Raanan Gillon (ed.), *Principles of Health Care Ethics*, Chichester, John Wiley & Sons, 1994; and to Blackwell Publishers for permission to reproduce the (modified) diagram on p. 116.

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University of Brighton
1997

INTRODUCTION

My intention in this book is polemical, but not rhetorical. For while I shall try to persuade readers that the whole idea of a liberal morality is in the end untenable, the very possibility of my doing so rests on a sense of, and a confidence in, a rationality which it is liberalism's great achievement to have bequeathed us. Thus an underlying theme is that liberalism's loss of confidence in a universal and impartial rationality, resulting in its transformation into the series of relativisms now described as postmodernism, is misplaced; but that the seeds of this transformation have lain dormant in the liberal tradition. In particular, it is liberalism's difficulties in justifying morality which are central to that transformation and which show why, its achievements notwithstanding, liberal morality is in the end conceptually inadequate to the point of being corrosive.

My argument is simply that liberal morality is unsustainable because it cannot offer a rationally adequate account either of morality as a fact of everyday life or of any possible justification of moral principles and moral demands. I hope to lay the ground, in the longer run, for the possibility of a thoroughly rationalistic account and justification of morality; to refute both amoralists who reject the claims of morality upon them and (philosophical) sceptics who, however they may actually behave, reject the possibility of any rational justification of (even their own) moral actions and judgements. In rejecting liberal morality and liberal theories of morality, then, I am emphatically not rejecting the liberal conception of rationality. In particular, I share the aspirations of classical no less than later nineteenth- and earlier twentieth-century liberals to a universal and impartial rationality—even if imperfectly realized, in that tradition as elsewhere, and even if too often limited to questions of means rather than extending also to ends.¹

The task concerning the liberal tradition's understanding of morality is in this book a wholly negative one: to offer grounds for rejecting what I think is the profoundly mistaken view that morality is in various ways rooted in what people want. To those who would not regard themselves as particularly impressed by the seductions of a consumerist culture—or convinced of the philosophical positions its advocates either explicitly adopt or implicitly rely upon—this may well seem an unambitious task. But both consumerist culture and its philosophical props run very deep. The unrestrained indulgence of greed which characterizes that culture and the intellectual parameters within which we think about it—even if critically—bolster each other. 'It's what people want': the twin assumptions that getting what we want is our 'natural goal', and that wanting something must be a good reason for going about getting it, largely determine what passes for public policy and political debate. Whether it is a matter of pornography in the press, treatment for infertility or getting married—if people want it, then that's that. Questioning such assertions of the apparently obvious produces disbelief more often than downright opposition, sheer amazement that anyone should actually think that getting what we want is not synonymous with pursuit of the good life. But it is not. To observe that people want something is just the start, and not the conclusion, of moral debate. What people want is, so to speak, the difficulty that morality is called upon to deal with, the problem we try to solve by invoking moral considerations.

In a way, of course, people know this already. After all, most of us at least sometimes do something just because we think it is the right thing to do—despite not wanting to do it, or even despite wanting not to do it. So, for example, nurses might assist with an abortion despite their feelings about the matter; or union officials might object to pin-ups on the workshop wall despite liking them. Yet the refrain that 'it's what people want' could hardly have achieved its ubiquity or its power if this were all there was to it. The problem is that we seem also to know this just as clearly: that if people do something they do not want to, or even want not to, because they think it is right, then that merely shows that what they want most of all is to do what is right. It is simply a case of the stronger, perhaps more long-term, wants winning out against weaker, more immediate ones. In a fundamental sense, and unless we are being physically coerced (in which case the notion of any action, let alone moral action, is lost) we always want to do what we do: our doing so shows this. But this argument, seductive

though it is, is mistaken; although to dislodge it and the larger framework within which it gains its force requires considerable effort.

For so firmly entrenched is the position I have briefly sketched that even opponents of liberal moral views and/or of liberal theories about how such views might be justified (or not) all too often base their critiques on the very same assumptions which underlie the liberal edifice they attack. At best, they incorporate them into their alternative accounts, with the result that their opposition is thus subject to precisely the same objections as the liberalism against which it is aimed. Worse still, many critics of liberal accounts and understandings of morality do not appear even to notice that they are incorporating their opponents' basic starting-point into their own critiques. To the extent, then, that liberals offer at least some explicit defence of their conception of the person and of the work it does at the basis of their moral positions and their account of moral theory, they immediately have the upper hand, however inadequate that defence actually is. For their arguments, anyway already ideologically incorporated into much of our thinking, are the only arguments on offer. Thus their opponents' habitual failure to provide counter-arguments against what is fundamental to liberalism serves merely to embed liberal ideology more firmly. The Right, of course, knows this perfectly well, however carefully its ideologues might on occasion seek to disguise their rhetoric in liberal clothes; the Left, in general, has still to learn to avoid this liberal seduction.² The general form of the phenomenon will doubtless be familiar to anyone exasperated by the political 'debate' that marks the close of the twentieth century in Britain, the rest of Europe and the USA. It is a recurrent refrain in the chapters that follow; the sub-text of, and reason for, my engagement with elements of a philosophical tradition; and the dominant theme of my subsequent attempts to follow through my criticisms into specific areas of moral practice and concern. The eventual task of setting out a positive view of morality and a credible justification of its legitimate demands cannot succeed unless this profound and pervasive set of errors is first identified; its historical provenance uncovered; its ubiquity appreciated; and its appeal undermined.

It is to a considerable extent because what we want has come to occupy a foundational position in our lives that we have become less and less confident in the rationality we have inherited from the Enlightenment; and vice versa. Thus it is a corollary of my position that the fashionably postmodern rejection of the very possibility of an objectively justifiable moral demand flows directly, inexorably and

indeed quite rationally from the liberal modernism it seeks to reject. In the context of moral thinking, that is to say, the anti-rationalists who constitute much of what is called postmodernism, and who take liberals to task about their putatively universal morality, do so not so much by *rejecting* the liberal settlement of the Enlightenment which they characterize as the dead end of the (hitherto) modern era as by *pursuing* central liberal tenets to their awful conclusion.

This story—of postmodernism as the apotheosis of modernism rather than its nemesis—demands an extended historical and conceptual treatment, one which Roy Bhaskar and Norman Geras in particular have begun to tease out in the course of their demolitions of the unavoidable self-contradictions of Richard Rorty, one of its most notable gurus.³ First, the universalism that liberals have claimed is rejected on the grounds that it is inconsistent. Second, the (at best nebulous) liberal conception of the individual—derived from its historical progenitor and partner, empiricism—as an atomic, pre-social individual is retained, lauded and taken seriously. Postmodernism is the outcome of the destructive dialectic between the twin peaks of empiricism and liberalism: their squeamishness about reason and their misconceivedly atomized—because deracinated—conception of the individual.

The foundations of all this lie in the historical intertwining of empiricism, with its atomic conception of the individual, and liberalism, with its anti-authoritarian insistence on the rational independence of such individuals. In brief my argument is that classical liberalism (from Hobbes to at least James Mill, and arguably to John Stuart Mill) is the moral philosophy of empiricism; that that moral philosophy is inevitably individualistic, the liberal individual logically preceding society; and that such a conception of the individual is itself inadequate. When I refer to liberalism, then, I intend a moral, rather than a political, theory; and classical, rather than social, liberalism. Of course, a social and political liberalism may be built on the basis of a liberal theory of morality: but it does not require such a foundation. Liberal morality, however, cannot but lead in the direction of a liberal polity. I am not, therefore, making a claim about the whole of what has come to be known as liberalism, but only about what I take to be its moral and epistemological bases, both logically and historically, and thus about its root form: classical (non-Kantian and non-social) liberalism. I leave to others the question of whether any variety of political liberalism can be consistently maintained independently of this root, since my concern is with that root itself

and with its ubiquitous moral progeny.⁴ I shall often refer, then, to ‘empirico-liberalism’, a rather inelegant term which I have coined partly in order to emphasize the point that empiricism and liberalism are historical twins, whatever their later histories and logical interdependencies. With its interconnected insistence both on a radical difference between matters of fact and matters of value and on a socially unencumbered individual, then, empirico-liberalism cannot but develop into the subjectivism and relativism of the postmodern insistence on difference and otherness, an insistence inimical to morality. Two things are required if such a rejection of morality is to be resisted, and the ground thus at least prepared for a positive account and justification of morality not dependent on the shortcomings of empirico-liberalism: the conception of the individual which has its home in these traditions must be shown to be inadequate; and the rationality recovered on which a universalism might properly be based, and which might afford morality the impartiality it requires.

It is of the first importance, then, that the original liberal—and indeed the original—notion of morality as impartial be sustained.⁵ For if it is not, if the very idea of such a notion of morality is rejected as erroneously ‘universalist’, absurdly ‘objectivist’ or naïvely ‘rationalistic’, then the conflicts which we have invented moral structures and strictures to resolve—as the alternative to physical force in all its various manifestations—cannot even in principle be subject to impartial, disinterested resolution. David Wiggins makes the point elegantly and remorselessly:

Let it be clear that there is a difference between there being nothing else to think and there being nothing else *for us* to think; and equally clear that what we are concerned with is the first of these things, not the second.⁶

This ideal of impartial disinterestedness is, of course, just what many people of a postmodern, or perhaps postmodernish, outlook reject. In everyday settings, this often takes the form of asking, in response to any moral judgement, ‘Who are you to say?’ At least that is more understandable, and perhaps more forgivable, than its sophisticated academic version: the unforgivably irresponsible comment, for instance, of a born-again postmodernist like Jean Baudrillard, who, purporting to be writing about the Gulf War, denies that there is anything actually happening to be talked about.⁷ Notice, however, that the first sort of response is not confined to those who think of themselves as postmodern, or perhaps post-liberal: it is often the

instinctive liberal response itself, a response no less logical for being instinctive. For in the internal battle within the liberal tradition between the commitment to a universalistic rationality and a horror of authority, it is the latter which must win: and with that victory the possibility of any justification of morality collapses. With that collapse, furthermore, must also disappear any practically viable morality, as contrasted with some set of enforced social conventions or ideological impositions masquerading as morality and illegitimately usurping its status. Hume's position on this was at least consistent: 'It is needless to push our researches so far as to ask, why we have humanity or a fellow-feeling with others? It is sufficient that this is experienced to be a principle of human nature.'⁸ Postmodern reformulations and retrenchments are no improvement on Hume.

The postmodern dream is of wants rampant, unrestrained even by the residual reason of classical liberalism, which appears in the guise of a Nietzschean Hume who not only believes, with the historical Hume, that it is not irrational to prefer the destruction of the entire world to the scratching of his finger,⁹ but who—unlike Hume—appears willing to act on such a preference. While Hume was drawing attention to what he thought was the mistake of supposing that morality could be justified by reason, he did not think that it could not be justified at all.¹⁰ Contrary to the easy dismissals to be found in some of today's authorities, but absent in Hume—who, however unsuccessfully, argued for the necessity of at least a simulacrum of the morality he thought 'not an object of reason'¹¹—morality is something we cannot do without. I shall say little directly about postmodernism, then—'much *à la mode* at the moment but, it is to be hoped, on the way out'¹²—but rather stick with the liberal—empiricist tradition, of which I regard it as merely an inevitable outcome. What is important is that liberal morality is unsustainable; its Humean stand-in, a sort of necessary social myth, a poor substitute; and that it has therefore to be replaced. In order to be able to do this, however, we need to employ without apology the rationality, however imperfect, of the liberal tradition.

I hope that these general observations—or rather, assertions—have given readers some sense of what I am up to. At least it should come as no surprise that my overall position about the nature of morality is that there are true moral propositions and that these are quite independent of anyone's beliefs about what is right or wrong. Moral knowledge, however approximate, is possible and is available to all.¹³ In terms of current debates in moral philosophy, the view is best

described as a variety of moral cognitivism: just as there are factual and mathematical truths, so there are moral truths; we can know some of these; and this is so whatever exactly their metaphysical status may be. In this book, however, I am concerned to do no more than to help make this sort of general position more plausible by marshalling theoretical arguments, and then setting out some examples of moral issues, against the assumption which stands in its way, and which is the foundation of our prevailing 'common sense': that what human beings want lies at the basis of morality. I shall argue that, contrary to the empirico-liberalism which has come both to form that 'common sense' and to inform its philosophical underpinnings, considerations of what we want are morally irrelevant. (Of course, we need to take others' wants into account, other things being equal: but the point about moral problems is that they arise when other things are not equal; and so people's wants cannot serve as moral justification.) So far as we do something for moral reasons, we do it because it is the right thing to do, quite independently of whether or not we happen to want to do it; and so far as morality in general can be rationally justified, what we want plays no part in such justification. Or, to put it another way: moral action is independent of what anyone wants; and moral theory cannot be founded on what anyone wants, might want or 'really' wants. That we, or most of us, should suppose otherwise is unsurprising, however, since the dominant liberalism of our society—taking over from empiricism a particular conception of what human beings are—both assumes that our wants are in an important sense inviolate and informs the consumerist culture which is its outcome. Theory and practice thus feed off each other and help defend each other from criticism by making it appear 'just common sense' that what we want matters, and matters supremely: 'When we wonder whether something is good, common sense will naturally direct our attention to *wants*.'¹⁴ Common sense may well do just that. But common sense, in this, its liberal and empiricist version, is mistaken. Mary Midgley's admirable and widely shared concern to refute much that is central in this tradition affords an early example of how easily objections to it are vitiated by assuming as given the 'common sense' which is largely its invention and which it continues to propagate.

A brief note about my choice of words is needed at the outset. Many writers use 'desire' where I stick to 'wants'. I do so for three reasons. First, 'desire' has connotations of being driven, often sexually. Second, 'want' is the broader term in general everyday usage, incorporating notions of 'wishing for' and its cognates, while 'desire'

is the more technically philosophical term; and it is the everyday usage and the assumptions underlying it which are my chief target. Third, 'want' still retains, although very nearly archaically, the notion of lacking something: and the process of that sense's gradually losing its grip—to the point where its relation to the notion of need ('wanting for' something) has all but disappeared—is itself significantly associated with the rise of the empirico-liberal tradition and its ideological ubiquity. Even at the risk of occasional clumsiness, therefore, I shall stick to 'wants'.

And because my whole purpose is to undermine the idea of the importance of what people want, I need also to say a little at the outset about a use of the term 'want' (or 'desire') in a 'weak', or 'merely motivational', sense, which has recently emerged in some of the philosophical literature, and which is highly misleading. (I shall discuss these issues in detail in Chapter 4.) Thomas Nagel, for example, argues that having 'the appropriate desire simply *follows* from the fact that these considerations motivate me; if the likelihood that an act will promote my future happiness motivates me to perform it now, then it is appropriate to ascribe to me a desire for my own future happiness'.¹⁵ Briefly, my objection is this: if, contrary to general usage, wanting to do something is understood as just being disposed to do it, without any sense of active appetite—if to want something denotes merely a passive inclination—then why use the word 'want' (or 'desire') at all? If wanting something were just to be inclined or disposed to do it, then what would it add to say that someone also wanted to do what they were disposed or inclined to do? The point is that the terms are not synonymous. I may be inclined or disposed to take up an issue of public concern, for example, without wanting to at all. Or I might even do so despite wanting not to. To elide these differences is just a way of trying to give a plausible account of moral motivation without committing what is widely regarded as a philosophical heresy: namely, to allow that reason alone can motivate.¹⁶ If wanting something could be reduced in this way to being, broadly, inclined to pursue it, then, ironically, my overall argument would succeed all the more easily: for in that case, to say that someone wanted to do something would lose just that affective force which it requires if it is to play the moral role that liberals and empiricists claim for it.

To return to the 'commonsense' view of the importance of what we want: three intertwined issues run through the following chapters. First, there is the liberal conception of what people are, since it—rightly—roots both moral views and theories of morality in notions

of the nature of human beings: the liberal tradition is no exception so far as that is concerned.¹⁷ Second, there is the role and implications of that conception in relation to the central question of the justification of morality. Third, and arising out of these two sets of issues, there is my central target: the role that people's wants play in linking the liberal 'individual' with the possibility or otherwise of a rational justification of morality. For it is this unquestioned assumption which is fundamental, both historically and conceptually, to the liberal enterprise; which both underpins and explains liberalism's ideological pervasiveness; and which has to be challenged.

In brief, then, I shall argue that it is people's wants which have come to serve for such content as the 'individual' of the liberal tradition may be said to have; that this accounts both (historically) for the emphasis placed in our culture on what people want and (intellectually) for the generally unargued assumption that if morality is to be justified, then it has to be shown to be something that people want. But wants are not 'given' in the way that, for instance, certain of our biological features are; they cannot, therefore, serve as (quasi-) objective bases for our moral actions or judgements. Furthermore, since morality is concerned with the resolution of conflicts arising from our pursuit of what we want—indeed, it is the only available rational counterweight to its unfettered pursuit—wants cannot serve as the ground of any theoretical account or justification of morality. Crucial in all of this is the conviction that only one's wants, and not one's reasons, can motivate one to act: for since morality basically consists in what one does, in one's actions (moral beliefs which do not, or are not intended, at least, to issue in action can hardly be said to count) the question of how moral beliefs lead to action must be central. And because wants are, supposedly, all that can *motivate* one's actions, they come quite 'naturally' to be thought to be all that can finally *justify* one's actions.

To put it another way: the model of motivation which has it that only wants can lead to action has gone hand in hand with the empirico-liberal model of the individual as fundamentally constituted by wants. If that model of motivation is mistaken, then much of the attraction of that 'individual' disappears; and vice versa. Contrary even to Hume, however, wants have no place as motives for moral actions; or as the basis of the justification of such actions; or as the basis of any meta-ethical theory. The ubiquitous confusion between explanation and justification, more probably child than parent of the view that wants alone can move anyone to action, meshes in with the liberal

conception of the individual as centrally consisting in a set of wants. It also produces just that assumption about morality which I reject and which liberals, and nearly all their critics, share—that wants are central both to the content and the justification (if any) of morality. I agree that morality is, very roughly, a means of distinguishing between what it is and is not right to want; but then wants cannot serve as any sort of justification of morality. Yet the tradition I am criticizing is committed, often *faute de mieux*, to the view that they do. Even if we were ‘fundamentally a desiring animal’, as liberalism takes us to be, it would remain the case that morality ‘distinguishes those desires which may be pursued from those which may not’,¹⁸ so that it could not be wants which served to justify such distinctions. But we are not ‘fundamentally a desiring animal’. So the reason why non-sceptical (but also non-cognitivist, because empiricist) liberals should attempt to ground morality in what people want—as their only means of basing it on some view of the nature of human beings, of bridging the sceptics’ alleged gap between facts and values—dissolves anyway. The liberal commitment to the role of wants in morality and in moral theory is not only a mistake; it is an unnecessary mistake. Importantly, however, even if the liberal tradition’s conception of the individual were not, after all, as inadequate as I take it to be—a judgement which must itself wait upon a consideration of its moral ramifications, since our notions of ‘what people are’ are to a large extent moral notions—that concept does not have the implications for the business of justifying morality that its proponents suppose. For moral actions, as I shall begin to argue in Chapter 6, are just those which are rationally motivated. Reason can do more work than the empirico-liberal tradition supposes (though just how much more is a question for a different book).

It is because, as Elizabeth Frazer and Nicola Lacey put it, liberal conceptions of morality constitute a ‘social fact’¹⁹—because it has become ‘commonsensical’ to suppose that what we want is both central to morality and the starting-point of any possible justification of it—that this fundamental liberal assumption has misled generations of critics of liberal and empiricist views of morality. Nearly everyone takes this assumption on board without question, from those who argued against A.J. Ayer’s empiricist identification of morality with emotion rather than thought, to contemporary communitarians who criticize Rawls’s theory of justice as being based on purportedly freely choosing individuals who, in being hopelessly a-social, ungendered and abstract, are a liberal chimera. The same ‘common sense’ seems

also, and perhaps more surprisingly, to be shared by both the non-realists who today exemplify the empirico-liberal tradition (those who think, broadly, that facts are one sort of thing and values quite another) and their increasingly influential realist critics (who, in one way or another, reject such a dichotomy)—let alone by postmodernist celebrants of the pursuit of whatever we happen to want. That is why even such prominent and powerful critics of liberal ‘common sense’ as, for example, Charles Taylor and Michael Sandel²⁰—by no means of the postmodern persuasion—are so reluctant to challenge the liberals’ antipathy towards any sort of authoritative rationality, which they, no less strongly but far more explicitly, regard as a threat to individuals’ autonomy. That is why they have no alternative but to cast their critiques in terms of a communitarianism, or a relativism of cultures, which insists that rationality always has culturally internal parameters and limitations. They rightly argue that ethics and epistemology cannot be simply separated out, but they inevitably relativize morality just because they are unwilling to adopt a non-relativist conception of rationality, and thus a non-relativist notion of human beings as rational animals. Their moral cognitivism is bought at the price of limiting it to those who, in various ways, have it culturally imposed upon them or who choose to adopt it. But that price is too high, and anyway does not have to be paid.

The impasse can be avoided by refusing to be charmed into supposing that one has in any sense or on any level to want to act morally if one is to do so and/or to be justified in doing so. Rejecting wants is a way of rejecting the limitations and inadequacies of the liberal conception of morality without being inveigled into any sort of anti-rational communitarianism. It is, as I have already suggested, a way of retaining a broadly Kantian conception of morality without, however, adopting Kant’s liberal-inspired conception of people as irreducibly individual, a conception admirably described by Bernard Williams in the course of his distancing himself from it:

the moral point of view is basically different from a non-moral, and in particular self-interested, point of view, and by a difference of kind;...the moral point of view is specially characterized by its impartiality and its indifference to any particular relations to particular persons, and...moral thought requires abstraction from particular circumstances and particular characteristics of the parties, including the agent, except in so far as these can be treated as universal features of any morally similar

situation; and...the motivations of a moral agent, correspondingly, involve a rational application of impartial principle and are thus different in kind from the sorts of motivations that he might have for treating some particular persons...differently because he happened to have some particular interest towards them.²¹

In the next chapter, then, I shall first draw out the political context of my argument by distinguishing the liberal from a conservative conception of the role of people's wants in morality and commenting briefly on the implications of this difference. Then, lest in these postmodern times my criticisms of liberalism mislead readers, I shall sketch an account of how liberalism has liberated us from moral authoritarianism, emphasizing the importance of its rationally critical edge, before going on to offer an account of the sort of moral agent that emerges from this picture of the liberal individual as 'a wanting thing'. That will serve to introduce a discussion, in Chapter 3, of the historical provenance of liberal morality, based as it is on a conception of the nature of human beings derived from the empiricism of Hobbes, Locke and others. In particular, I shall argue that the 'individuals' of the empirico-liberal tradition, being both ontologically primary and yet substantially empty, require wants that are peculiarly their own so as to be distinguishable one from another. Most importantly, perhaps, I shall attempt to show how liberals' horror of authority in the moral sphere unites with such assumptions about the nature of individuals to produce what I have termed empirico-liberalism. Finally, in that chapter, I shall offer an account of the sort of moral agent that emerges from this picture of the liberal individual as 'a wanting thing'.

The pervasiveness of this picture in contemporary moral thinking will be discussed in Chapter 4. First, I shall offer an account of how the assumption of the inviolability of what we want runs through the work even of thinkers unimpressed by the empiricist insistence on a fundamental disjunction between 'facts' and 'values', unimpressed, that is, by the mid-twentieth century positivists of the Anglo-American tradition. In doing so, I hope also to show how it undermines their critique, using the broadly liberal work of Hare, Foot and Williams as exemplars. Second, I shall show how the same insistence operates in the work of liberalism's most influential contemporary standard-bearers, Rawls and Gewirth; and how, in focusing on wants, they appeal to a universal form, while apparently

allowing its content to remain a private matter for each of us. Third, I shall perform a similar operation on the avowedly anti-liberal responses of MacIntyre, Taylor and Poole. Running through all this is the negative thesis that the attempt to justify morality is better postponed, or even abandoned, than grounded in what people want. For once it is conceded that reason really is ‘the slave of the passions’, as Hume disarmingly put it,²² morality cannot be justified at all. Failed attempts serve merely to bolster both the amoralists and the philosophical sceptics who take their cue from Thrasymachus, the figure who, having first haunted western philosophy, now succours its postmodern detractors with his insistence that ‘justice’ is simply ‘what is in the interest of the stronger’.²³

In Chapter 5, I shall criticize this empirico-liberal understanding of what it is to want something, arguing that wants are not what that tradition takes them to be and so cannot do the job it demands of them. This will involve discussing in detail the alleged incorrigibility of wants; the view that there are things that simply any rational person must want; the ‘weak’ conception of wants as merely redescribed dispositions, to which I have already alluded; and the relation of ‘wanting’ to ‘willing’. In Chapter 6, I shall discuss the interrelations between wanting to do something, being motivated to do it, giving reasons for doing it and justifying one’s actions. In particular, I shall argue that, although often and disastrously conflated, a justification of one’s action and an explanation of how one has come to act are entirely distinct. And that distinction, I think, helps to detract from the force of the long-standing position on motivation, that ‘reason alone can never produce any action’,²⁴ a position which is perhaps the strongest prop of the view of morality I am arguing against. I shall therefore attempt to develop, however embryonically, a theory of specifically moral motivation which builds on recent objections, especially Jonathan Dancy’s, to the traditional view of motivation in general.

Having thus cleared the theoretical ground for my argument, I shall offer in Chapter 7 a brief discussion of the relation of the issues of moral theory so far raised to questions of the moral role of people’s wants in the market-obsessed and reason-blind preference satisfaction assumptions of the contemporary moral climate. Finally, in Chapter 8, I shall discuss a few practical moral issues. In doing so, I hope both to bolster my earlier, theoretical, case, by showing what happens if wants are treated with the seriousness they do not deserve, and to do so as a means of advancing certain views about specific moral issues. I hope

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