

## Duties Concerning Islands

*Of Rights & Obligations—By MARY MIDGLEY*

HAD ROBINSON CRUSOE any duties on his island?

When I was a philosophy student, this used to be a familiar conundrum, which was supposed to pose a very simple question: namely, can you have duties to yourself? Mill, they correctly told us, said no.

“The term duty to oneself, when it means anything more than prudence, means self-respect or self-development and for none of these is anyone accountable to his fellow-creatures.”<sup>1</sup>

Kant, on the other hand, said yes.

“Duties to ourselves are of primary importance and should have pride of place . . . nothing can be expected of a man who dishonours his own person.”<sup>2</sup>

There is a serious disagreement here, not to be sneezed away just by saying—“it depends on what you mean by duty.” Much bigger issues are involved. But quite how big has, I think, not yet been fully realised. To grasp this, I suggest that we rewrite a part of Crusoe’s story, so as to bring in sight a different range of concerns, thus:

“*Sept. 19, 1685.* This day I set aside to devastate my island. My pinnacle being now ready on the shore, and all things prepared for my departure, Friday’s people also expecting me, and the wind blowing fresh away from my little harbour, I had in mind to see how all would burn. So then, setting sparks and powder craftily among certain dry spinneys which I had chosen, I soon had it ablaze, nor was there left, by the next dawn, any green stick among the ruins. . . .”

Now, work on the style how you will, you cannot make that into a convincing paragraph. Crusoe was not the most scrupulous of men, but he would have felt an invincible objection to this senseless destruction. So would the rest of us. Yet the

language of our moral tradition has tended strongly, ever since the Enlightenment, to make that objection unstateable. All the terms which express that a claim is serious or binding—duty, right, law, morality, obligation, justice—have been deliberately narrowed in their use so as to apply only within the framework of contract, to describe only relations holding between free and rational agents. Since it has been decided *a priori* that rationality has no degrees and that cetaceans are not rational, it follows that, unless you take either religion or science fiction seriously, we can only have duties to humans, and sane, adult, fully responsible humans at that.

Now the morality we live by certainly does not accept this restriction. In common life we recognise many other duties as serious and binding, though of course not necessarily overriding. If philosophers want to call these something else instead of “duties”, they must justify their move. We have here one of these clashes between the language of common morality (which is of course always to some extent confused and inarticulate) and an intellectual scheme which arose in the first place from a part of that morality, but has now taken off on its own and claims authority to correct other parts of its source.

There are always real difficulties here. As ordinary citizens we have to guard against dismissing such intellectual schemes too casually; we have to do justice to the point of them. But as philosophers, we have to resist the opposite temptation of taking the intellectual scheme as decisive, just because it is elegant and satisfying, or because the moral insight which is its starting-point is specially familiar to us. Today, this intellectualist bias is often expressed by calling the insights of common morality mere “intuitions.” This is quite misleading, since it gives the impression that they have been reached without thought, and that there is, by contrast, a scientific solution somewhere else to which they ought to bow as there might be if we were contrasting commonsense “intuitions” about the physical world with physics or astronomy. Even when they do not use that word, however, philosophers often manage to give the impression

<sup>1</sup> J. S. Mill, *Essay on Liberty*, Ch. IV (Everyman ed.), p. 135.

<sup>2</sup> Immanuel Kant, “Duties to Oneself”, in *Lectures on Ethics* (tr. Infield, 1930), p. 118.

that whenever our moral views clash with any simple, convenient scheme, it is our *duty* to abandon them. Thus G. R. Grice:

"It is an inescapable consequence of the thesis presented in these pages that certain classes cannot have natural rights: animals, the human embryo, future generations, lunatics and children under the age of, say, ten. In the case of young children at least, my experience is that this consequence is found hard to accept. But it is a consequence of the theory; it is, I believe, true; and I think we should be willing to accept it. At first sight it seems a harsh conclusion, but it is not nearly so harsh as it appears. . . ."

(*Grounds of Moral Judgment*, 1967, pp. 146-47)

But it is in fact extremely harsh, since what he is saying is that the treatment of children ought not to be determined by their interests, but by the interests of the surrounding adults capable of contract, which of course can easily conflict with them.

In our own society, he explains, this does not actually make much difference, because parents here are so benevolent that they positively want to benefit their children; and accordingly here "the interests of children are reflected in the interests of their parents." But this, he adds, is just a contingent fact about us. "It is easy to imagine a society where this is not so", where, that is, parents are entirely exploitative. "In this circumstance, the morally correct treatment of children would no doubt be harsher than it is in our society. But the conclusion has to be accepted." Grice demands that we withdraw our objections to harshness, in deference to theoretical consistency. But "harsh" here does not mean just "brisk and bracing" like cold baths and a plain diet. (There might well be more of those where parents do feel bound to consider their children's interests.) It means unjust.

Our objection to unbridled parental selfishness is not a mere matter of tone or taste; it is a moral one. It therefore requires a moral answer, an explanation of the contrary value which the contrary theory expresses. Grice and those who argue like him take the ascetic, disapproving tone of people who have already displayed such a value, and who are met by a slovenly reluctance to rise to it. But they have not displayed that value. The ascetic tone cannot be justified merely by an appeal to consistency. An ethical theory which, when consistently followed through, has iniquitous consequences is a bad theory and must be changed. Certainly we can ask whether these consequences really are iniquitous; but this question must be handled seriously. We cannot directly conclude that the consequences cease to stink the moment they are seen to follow from our theory.

THE THEORETICAL MODEL which has spread blight in this area is, of course, that of social contract, to fit which the whole cluster of essential moral terms which I mentioned—right, duty, justice, and the rest—has been progressively narrowed. This model shows human society as a spread of standard social atoms, originally distinct and independent, each of which combines with others only at its own choice and in its own private interest. This model is drawn from physics, and from 17th-century physics at that, where the ultimate particles of matter were conceived as hard, impenetrable, homogeneous little billiard-balls, with no hooks or internal structure. To see how such atoms could combine at all was very hard. Physics, accordingly, moved on from this notion to one which treats atoms and other particles as complex items, describable mainly in terms of forces, and those the same kind of forces which operate outside them. It has abandoned the notion of ultimate, solitary, independent individuals.

Social contract theory, however, retains it. On this physical—or archaeophysical—model, all significant moral relations between individuals are the symmetrical ones expressed by contract. If, on the other hand, we use a biological or "organic" model, we can talk also of a variety of asymmetrical relations found within a whole. Leaves relate not only to other leaves, but to fruit, twigs, branches, and the whole tree. People appear not only as individuals, but as members of their groups, families, tribes, species, ecosystems and biosphere, and have moral relations, as parts, to these various wholes.

The choice between these two ways of thinking is not, of course, a simple once-for-all affair. Different models are useful for different purposes. We can, however, reasonably point out, first, that the old physical pattern makes all attempts to explain combination extremely difficult. Second, that since human beings actually are living creatures, not crystals or galaxies, it is reasonable to expect that biological ways of thinking will be useful in understanding them.

IN ITS OWN SPHERE, the social contract model has of course been of enormous value. Where we deal with clashes of interest between free and rational agents already in existence, and particularly where we want to disentangle a few of them from some larger group which really does not suit them, it is indispensable. And for certain political purposes during the last three centuries these clashes have been vitally important. An obsession with contractual thinking and a conviction that it is a cure-all are therefore understandable. But the trouble with such obsessions is that they distort

the whole shape of thought and language in a way which makes them self-perpetuating, and constantly extends their empire. Terms come to be defined in a way which leaves only certain moral views expressible. This can happen without any clear intention on the part of those propagating them, and even contrary to their occasional declarations, simply from mental inertia.

Thus, John Rawls, having devoted most of his long book to his very subtle and exhaustive contractual view of justice, remarks without any special emphasis near the end that,

“We should recall here the limits of a theory of justice. Not only are many aspects of morality left aside, but no account can be given of right conduct in regard to animals and the rest of nature. (A Theory of Justice, p. 512)

He concedes that these are serious matters.

“Certainly it is wrong to be cruel to animals and the destruction of a whole species can be a great evil. The capacity for feelings of pleasure and pain and for the forms of life of which animals are capable clearly impose duties of compassion and humanity in their case.”

All this is important, he says, and it calls for a wider metaphysical enquiry, but it is not his subject. Earlier in the same passage he touches on the question of permanently irrational human beings, and remarks that it “may present a difficulty. I cannot examine this problem here, but I assume that the account of equality would not be materially affected.”

Won't it though? It is a strange project to examine a single virtue—justice—without at least sketching in one's view of the vast background of general morality which determines its shape and meaning, including, of course, such awkward and non-contractual virtues as “compassion and humanity.” It isolates the duties which people owe each other *merely as thinkers* from those deeper and more general ones which they owe each other as beings who feel. It cannot, therefore, fail both to split man's nature and to isolate him from the rest of the creation to which he belongs. Such an account may not be *Hamlet* without the prince, but it is *Hamlet* with half the cast missing, and without the state of Denmark. More exactly, it is like a history of Poland which regards Russia, Germany, Europe, and the Roman Church as not part of its subject.

I am not attacking John Rawls' account on its own ground. I am simply pointing out what the history of ethics shows all too clearly—how much our thinking is shaped by what our sages *omit* to

mention. The Greek philosophers never really raised the problem of slavery till towards the end of their epoch, and then few of them did so with conviction. This happened even though it lay right in the path of their enquiries into political justice and the value of the individual soul. Christianity did raise that problem, because its social background was different, and because the world was in the Christian era already in turmoil, so that men were not presented with the narcotic of happy stability. But Christianity itself did not, until quite recently, raise the problem of the morality of punishment, and particularly of eternal punishment.

This failure to raise central questions was not in either case complete. One can find very intelligent and penetrating criticisms of slavery occurring from time to time in Greek writings—even in Aristotle's defence of that institution.<sup>3</sup> But they are mostly like Rawls's remark here. They conclude “this should be investigated some day.” The same thing happens with Christian writings concerning punishment, except that the consideration “this is a great mystery” acts as an even more powerful paralytic to thought. Not much more powerful, however. Natural inertia, when it coincides with vested interest or the illusion of vested interest, is as strong as gravitation.

IT IS IMPORTANT THAT Rawls does not (like Grice) demand that we toe a line which would make certain important moral views impossible. Like Hume, who similarly excluded animals from justice, he simply leaves them out of his discussion. This move ought in principle to be harmless. But when it is combined with an intense concentration of discussion on contractual justice, and a corresponding neglect of compassion and humanity, it inevitably suggests that the excluded problems are relatively unimportant.

This suggestion is still more strongly conveyed by rulings which exclude the non-human world from rights, duties, and morality. Words like *rights* and *duties* are awkward because they do indeed have narrow senses approximating to the legal, but they also have much wider ones in which they cover the whole moral sphere. To say “They do not have rights” or “You do not have duties to them” conveys to any ordinary hearer a very simple message, namely, “They do not matter. . . .” This is an absolution, a removal of blame for ill-treatment of “them”, whoever they may be.

To see how strong this informal, moral usage of “rights” is, we need only look at the history of that powerful notion, “the Rights of Man.” These rights were not supposed to be ones conferred by law, since the whole point of appealing to them

<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, *Politics* I, 3-8, cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* VII, 11.

was to change laws so as to embody them. They were vague, but vast. They did not arise, as rights are often said to do, only within a community, since they were taken to apply in principle everywhere. The immense, and on the whole coherent, use which has been made of this idea by reforming movements shows plainly that the tension between the formal and the informal idea of *right* is part of the word's meaning, a fruitful connection of thought, not just a mistake. It is therefore hard to adopt effectively the compromise which some philosophers now favour, of saying that it is indeed wrong to treat animals in certain ways, but that we have no duties to them or that they have no rights.<sup>4</sup> "Animal rights" may be hard to formulate, as indeed are the rights of man. But "no rights" will not do.<sup>5</sup> The word may need to be dropped entirely.

THE COMPROMISE is still harder with the word *duty*, which is rather more informal, and is more closely wedded to a private rather than political use. Where the realm of right and duty stops, there, to ordinary thinking, begins the realm of the optional. What is not a duty may be a matter of taste, style or feeling, of aesthetic sensibility, of habit and nostalgia, of etiquette and local custom; but it cannot be something which demands our attention whether we like it or not. When claims get into this area, they can scarcely be taken seriously.

This becomes clear when Kant tries to straddle the border. He says that we have no direct duties to animals, because they are not rational, but that we should treat them properly all the same because of "indirect duties" which are really duties to our own humanity.<sup>6</sup> This means that ill-treating them might lead us to ill-treat humans, and is also a sign of a bad or inhumane disposition. The whole issue thus becomes a contingent one of spiritual style or training, like contemplative exercises, intellectual practice, or indeed refined manners.<sup>7</sup> Some might need practice of this kind to make them kind to people; others might not and indeed might get on better without it. (Working off one's ill-temper on animals might make one treat people *better*.) But the question of cruelty to animals cannot be like this, because it is of the essence of such training exercises that they are

internal. Anything that affects some other being is not just practice, it is real action. Anyone who refrained from cruelty *merely* from a wish not to sully his own character, without any direct consideration for the possible victims, would be frivolous and narcissistic.

A SIMILAR TRIVIALISATION follows where theorists admit duties of compassion and humanity to noncontractors, but deny duties of justice. Hume and Rawls, in making this move, do not explicitly subordinate these other duties, or say that they are less binding. But because they make the contract element so central to morality, this effect seems to follow. The priority of justice is expressed in such everyday proverbs as "Be just before you're generous." We are therefore rather easily persuaded to think that compassion, humanity, and so forth are perhaps emotional luxuries, to be indulged only after all debts are paid.

A moment's thought will show that this is wrong. Someone who receives simultaneously a request to pay a debt and another to comfort somebody bereaved or on their death-bed is not, as a matter of course, under obligation to pay the debt first. He has to look at circumstances on both sides; but in general we should probably expect the other duties to have priority. This is still more true if, on his way to pay the debt, he encounters a stranger in real straits, drowning or lying injured in the road. To give the debt priority, we probably need to think of his creditor as also being in serious trouble—which brings compassion and humanity in on both sides of the case.

WHAT MAKES IT SO HARD to give justice a different clientèle from the other virtues—as Hume and Rawls do—is simply the fact that justice is such a pervading virtue. In general, all serious cases of cruelty, meanness, inhumanity, and the like are also cases of injustice. If we are told that a certain set of these cases does not involve injustice, our natural thought is that these cases must be *trivial*. Officially, Hume's and Rawls's restriction is not supposed to mean this. What, however, is it supposed to mean? It is forty years since I first read David Hume's text, and I find his thought as obscure now as I did then. I well remember double-taking then, and going back over the paragraph for a point which I took it I must have missed. Can anyone see it?

"Were there [Hume says] a species of creature intermingled with men, which, though rational, were possessed of such inferior strength, both of body and mind, that they were incapable of all resistance, and could never, upon the highest provocation, make us feel the effects of their

<sup>4</sup> E.g. John Passmore, *Man's Responsibility for Nature* (1974), pp. 116-117; H. J. McCloskey, "Rights", *Philosophical Quarterly* (No. 15), 1965.

<sup>5</sup> Nor will it help for philosophers to say "it is not the case that they have rights." Such pompous locutions have either no meaning at all, or the obvious one.

<sup>6</sup> Kant, "Duties towards Animals and Spirits", *Lectures on Ethics*, p. 240.

<sup>7</sup> A point well discussed by Stephen Clark, *The Moral Status of Animals* (1977), pp. 12-13.

resentment; the necessary consequence, I think, is that we should be bound by the laws of humanity to give gentle usage to these creatures, but should not, properly speaking, lie under any restraint of justice with regard to them, nor could they possess any right or property, exclusive of such arbitrary lords. Our intercourse with them could not be called society, which supposes a degree of equality, but absolute command on one side and servile obedience on the other. This is plainly the situation of men with regard to animals." (*Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, para 152)

I still think that the word justice, so defined, has lost its normal meaning. In ordinary life we think that duties of justice become *more* pressing, not less so, when we are dealing with the weak and inarticulate, who cannot argue back. It is the boundaries of prudence which depend on power, not those of justice.

Historically, Hume's position becomes more understandable when one sees its place in the development of social-contract thinking. The doubtful credit for confining justice to the human species seems to belong to Grotius, who finally managed to ditch the Roman notion of *ius naturale*, natural right or law common to all species. I cannot here discuss his remarkably unimpressive arguments for this.<sup>8</sup> The point I want to make here is simply the effect of these restrictive definitions of terms like justice on people's view of the sheer size of the problems raised by what falls outside them.

**W**RITERS who treat morality as primarily contractual tend to discuss non-contractual cases briefly, casually, and parenthetically, as though they were rather rare. (Rawls's comments on the problem of mental defectives are entirely typical here.) We have succeeded, they say, in laying most of the carpet; why are you making this fuss about those little wrinkles behind the sofa?

This treatment confirms a view, already suggested by certain aspects of contemporary politics in the United States, that those who fail to clock in as normal rational agents and make their contracts are just occasional exceptions, constituting one more "minority" group—worrying no doubt to the scrupulous, but not a central concern of any society. Let us, then, glance briefly at their scope, by roughly listing some cases which seem to involve us in non-contractual duties. (The order is purely provisional and the numbers are added just for convenience.)

<sup>8</sup> For details see John Rodman, "Animal Justice; The Counter-Revolution in Natural Right and Law", *Inquiry* (Vol. 22, nos. 1-2), Summer 1979.

#### Human Sector

1. *The dead*
2. *Posterity*
3. *Children*
4. *The senile*
5. *The temporarily insane*
6. *The permanently insane*
7. *Defectives, ranging down to "human vegetables"*
8. *Human embryos*

#### Animal Sector

9. *Sentient animals*
10. *Non-sentient animals*

#### Inanimate Sector

11. *Plants of all kinds*
12. *Artefacts, including works of art*
13. *Inanimate but structured objects—crystals, rivers, rocks etc.*

#### Comprehensive

14. *Unchosen human groups of all kinds, including families, villages, cities and the species*
15. *Unchosen multi-species groups, such as ecosystems, forests, and countries*
16. *The biosphere*

#### Miscellaneous

17. *Arts and sciences*
18. *Oneself*
19. *God*

No doubt I have missed a few, but that will do to go on with.

The point is this. If we look only at a few of these groupings, and without giving them full attention, it is easy to think that we can include one or two as honorary contracting members, by a slight stretch of our conceptual scheme, and find arguments for excluding the others from serious concern entirely. But if we keep our eye on the size of the range, this stops being plausible.

As far as sheer numbers go, this is no minority of the beings with whom we have to deal. We are a small minority of them. As far as importance goes, it is certainly possible to argue that some of these sorts of being should concern us more and others less; we need a priority system. But to build it, *moral* arguments are required. The various kinds of claims have to be understood and compared, not written off in advance. We cannot rule that those who, in our own and other cultures, suppose that there is a direct objection to injuring or destroying some of them, are always just confused, and mean only, in fact, that this item will be needed for rational human consumption.

THE BLANK ANTITHESIS which Kant made between rational persons (having value) and mere things (having none) cannot serve us to map out this vast

continuum. And the idea that, starting at some given point on this list, we have a general licence for destruction, is itself a moral view which would have to be justified.

Our culture differs from most others in the breadth of destructive licence which it does allow itself, and from the 17th century onwards, that licence has been greatly extended. Scruples about rapine have been continually dismissed as irrational, but it is not always clear what the rational principles are supposed to be with which they conflict. Western destructiveness has not in fact developed in response to a new set of disinterested intellectual principles, demonstrating the need for more people and less redwoods, but mainly as a by-product of greed and increasing commercial confidence.

Humanistic hostility to superstition has certainly played some part in the process, because respect for the non-human items on our list is often taken to be religious. But it does not have to be. Many scientists who are card-carrying atheists can still see the point of preserving the biosphere. So can the rest of us, religious or otherwise. It is the whole of which we are parts, and its other parts concern us for that reason.

But the language of rights is rather ill-suited for expressing this, because it has been developed mainly for the protection of people who, though oppressed, are in principle articulate. This makes it quite reasonable for theorists to say that rights belong only to those who understand them and can claim them. When confronted with the Human Sector of our list, these theorists can either dig themselves in like Grice and exclude the lot, or stretch the scheme like Rawls, by including the hypothetical rational choices which these honorary members *would* make if they were not unfortunately prevented.

Since many of these people seem less rational than many animals, zoophiles like Peter Singer have then a good case for calling this second device arbitrary and specious, and extending rights to the border of sentience.<sup>9</sup> Here, however, the meaning of the term does become thin, and when we reach the inanimate area, usage will scarcely cover it.<sup>10</sup> There may be a point in campaigning to extend usage. But to me it seems wiser on the whole not to waste energy on this verbal point,

<sup>9</sup> A case first made by Jeremy Bentham, *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, Ch. 17, and ably worked out by Peter Singer in *Animal Liberation* (1976), Chs. 1, 5 and 6.

<sup>10</sup> It is worth noticing that long before this, when dealing merely with "the Rights of Man", the term often seems obscure, because to list and specify these rights is so much harder than to shout for them. The phrase is probably more useful as a slogan, indicating a general direction, than as a detailed conceptual tool.

<sup>11</sup> Kant, "Preface to the Metaphysical Elements of Ethics", *Introduction to Ethics*, Chs. 4 and 5.

but instead to insist on the immense variety of kinds of being with which we have to deal. Once we grasp this, we ought not to be surprised that we are involved in many different kinds of claim or duty. The dictum that "rights and duties are correlative" is quite misleading, because the two words keep different company, and one may be narrowed without affecting the other.

WHAT, THEN, about duties? I believe that this term can properly be used over the whole range. We have quite simply got many kinds of duties, including those to animals, to plants, and to the biosphere. But to speak in this way we must free the term once and for all from its restrictive contractual use, or irrelevant doubts will still haunt us. *If we cannot do this, we shall have to exclude the word duty, along with right (as a noun) from all detailed discussion, using wider words like wrong, right (adjectival), and ought instead.* This gymnastic would be possible but inconvenient.

The issue about duty becomes clear as soon as we look at the controversy from which I started, between Kant's and Mill's views on duties to oneself. What do we think about this? Are there duties of integrity, autonomy, self-knowledge, self-respect? It seems that there are.

Mill was right, of course, to point out that they are not duties *to* someone in the ordinary sense. The divided self is a metaphor. It is as natural and necessary a metaphor here as it is over, say, self-deception or self-control; but it certainly is not literal truth. The form of the requirement is different. Rights, for instance, certainly do not seem to come in here as they often would with duties to other persons: we shall scarcely say, "I have a right to my own respect." And the *kind* of things which we can owe ourselves are distinctive. It is not just chance who they are owed to. You cannot owe it to somebody else, as you can to yourself, to force him to act freely or with integrity. He owes that to himself; the rest of us can only remove outside difficulties.

As Kant justly said, our business is to promote our own perfection and the happiness of others; the perfection of others is an aim which belongs to them.<sup>11</sup> *Respect* indeed we owe both to ourselves and to others, but Kant may well be right to say that *self-respect* is really a different and deeper requirement, something without which all outward duties would become meaningless. (This may explain the paralysing effect of depression.)

Duties to oneself, in fact, are duties with a different *form*. They are far less close than outward duties to the literal model of debt, especially money debt. Money is a thing which can be owed

in principle to anybody; it is the same whoever you owe it to; and if by chance you come to owe it to yourself, the debt vanishes. Not many of our duties are really of this impersonal kind; the attempt to commute other sorts of duty into money is a notorious form of evasion. Utilitarianism, however, wants to make all duties as homogeneous as possible, and that is the point of Mill's position. He views all our self-concerning motives as parts of the desire for happiness. Therefore he places all duty, indeed, all morality, in the outside world, as socially required restriction of that desire—an expression, that is, of other people's desire for happiness.

"We do not call anything wrong, unless we mean that a person ought to be punished in some way or another for doing it; if not by law, by the opinion of his fellow-creatures; if not by opinion, by the reproaches of his own conscience. This seems the real turning-point of the distinction between morality and simple expediency. It is a part of the notion of Duty in every one of its forms, that a person may rightly be compelled to fulfil it. Duty is a thing which may be *exacted* from a person, as one exacts a debt."<sup>12</sup>

But to make the notion of wrongness depend on punishment and public opinion in this way instead of the other way round is wild.

Mill never minded falling flat on his face from time to time in trying out a new notion for the public good. He did it for us here—and we should, I think, take proper advantage of his generosity, and accept the impossibility which he demonstrates. The concepts cannot be connected up this way round. Unless you think of certain facts as wrong, it makes no sense to talk of punishment. "Punishing" alcoholics with aversion therapy, or experimental rats with electric shocks, is not really punishing at all; it is just deterrence. This "punishment" will not make their previous actions wrong, nor has it anything to do with morality. The real point of morality returns into Mill's

<sup>12</sup> J. S. Mill, *Utilitarianism* (Everyman ed.), Ch. 5, p. 45.

<sup>13</sup> The book so titled, by Peter Tompkins and Christopher Bird (1973), claimed to show, by various experiments involving electrical apparatus, that plants can feel. Attempts to duplicate their experiments have, however, totally failed to produce any similar results. See A. W. Galson and C. L. Slayman, "The Not So Secret Life of Plants", *American Scientist* (No. 67 p. 337). It seems possible that the original results were due to a fault in the electrical apparatus.

The attempt shows, I think, one of the confusions which continually arise from insisting that all duties must be of the same form. We do not need to prove that plants are animals in order to have reason to spare them. This point is discussed by Marian Dawkins in her book *Animal Suffering* (Chapman and Hall, 1981), pp. 117-119.

scheme in the Trojan horse of "the reproaches of his own conscience." Why do *they* matter? Unless the conscience is talking sense—that is, on Utilitarian principles, unless it is delivering the judgment of society—it should surely be silenced? Mill, himself a man of enormous integrity and deeply concerned about autonomy, would never have agreed to silence it. But unless we do so, we shall have to complicate his scheme.

IT MAY WELL BE TRUE that, in the last resort and at the deepest level, conscience and the desire for happiness converge. We do want to be honest. But in ordinary life and at the everyday level they can diverge amazingly. We do not want to be put out. What we know we ought to do is often most unwelcome to us, which is why we call it *duty*. And whole sections of that duty do not concern other people directly at all.

A good example is the situation in *Brave New World* where a few dissident citizens have grasped the possibility of a fuller and freer life. Nobody else wants this. Happiness is already assured. If there is a duty of change here, it must be first of all that of each to himself. True, they may feel bound also to help others to change, but hardly in a way which those others would *exact*. In fact, we may do better here by dropping the awkward second party altogether and saying that they all have a duty of living differently—one which will affect both themselves and others, but which does not require, as a debt does, a named person or people to whom it must be paid. Wider models like "the whole duty of man" may be more relevant.

THIS ONE EXAMPLE from my list will, I hope, be enough to explain the point. I cannot go through all of them, nor ought it to be necessary. Duties need not be quasi-contractual relations holding between symmetrical pairs of rational human agents. There are all kind of other obligations holding between asymmetrical pairs, or involving, as in this case, no outside beings at all.

To speak of duties to things in the inanimate and comprehensive sectors of my list is not necessarily to personify them superstitiously, or to indulge in chatter about "the secret life of plants."<sup>13</sup> It expresses merely that there are suitable and unsuitable ways of behaving in given situations. People have duties as farmers, parents, consumers, forest-dwellers, colonists, species-members, ship-wrecked mariners, tourists, potential ancestors and actual descendants, etc. As such, it is the business of each not to forget his transitory and dependent position, the rich gifts which he has received, and the tiny part he plays in a vast, irreplaceable and fragile whole.

It is remarkable that we nowadays have to state this obvious truth as if it were new, and invent words like "ecological" to describe a whole vast class of duties. Most peoples are used to the idea. In stating it, and getting it back into the centre of our moral stage, we meet various difficulties, of which the most insidious is possibly the temptation to feed this issue as fuel to long-standing controversies about religion. Is concern for the non-human aspects of our biosphere necessarily superstitious and therefore to be resisted tooth-and-nail?

I have pointed out that it need not be religious at all. Certified rejectors of all known religions can share it. No doubt there is a wider sense in which any deep and impersonal concern can be called religious—one in which Marxism also is a religion. No doubt too all such deep concerns have their dangers, but certainly the complete absence of them has worse ones. Moreover, anyone wishing above all to avoid the religious dimension should consider that the intense individualism which has focused our attention exclusively on the social-contract model is itself thoroughly mystical. It has glorified the individual human soul as an object having infinite and transcendent value, has hailed it as the only real creator, and has bestowed on it much of the panoply of God.

Nietzsche, who was responsible for much of this new theology,<sup>14</sup> took over from the old Thomistic theology which he plundered the assumption that all the rest of creation mattered only as a frame for man. This is not an impression which any disinterested observer would get from looking round at it, nor do we need it in order to take our destiny sufficiently seriously.

**R**OBINSON CRUSOE then, I conclude, did have duties concerning his island, and with the caution just given we can reasonably call them duties *to* it.

They were not very exacting, and were mostly negative. They differed, of course, from those which a long-standing inhabitant of a country has. Here the language of *fatherland* and *motherland*, which is so widely employed, indicates rightly a

duty of care and responsibility which can go very deep, and which long-settled people commonly do feel strongly. To insist that it is really only a duty to the exploiting human beings is not consistent with the emphasis often given to reverence for the actual trees, mountains, lakes, rivers, and the like which are found there. A decision to inhibit all this rich area of human love is a special manoeuvre for which reasons would need to be given, not a dispassionate analysis of existing duties and feelings.

What happens, however, when you are shipwrecked on an entirely strange island? As the history of colonisation shows, there is a tendency for people so placed to drop any reverence and become more exploitative. But it is not irresistible. Raiders who settle down can quite soon begin to feel at home, as the Vikings did in East Anglia, and can after a while become as possessive, proud, and protective towards their new land as old inhabitants. Crusoe from time to time shows this pride rather touchingly, and it would, I think, certainly have inhibited any moderate temptation such as that which I mentioned to have a good bonfire. What keeps him sane through his stay, however, is in fact his duty to God. If that had been absent, I should rather suppose that sanity would depend on a stronger and more positive attachment to the island itself and its creatures.

It is interesting, however, that Crusoe's story played its part in developing that same unrealistic, icy individualism which has gone so far towards making both sorts of attachment seem corrupt or impossible. Rousseau delighted in Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, and praised it as the only book fit to be given to a child, *not* because it showed a man in his true relation to animal and vegetable life, but because it was the bible of individualism.

"The surest way to raise him [the child] above prejudice and to base his judgments on the true relations of things, is to put him in the place of a solitary man, and to judge all things as they would be judged by such a man in relation to their own utility. . . . So long as only bodily needs are recognised, man is self-sufficing . . . the child knows no other happiness but food and freedom!"

(*Emile*, Everyman ed, pp. 147-8)

That false atomic notion of human psychology—a prejudice above which nobody ever raised Rousseau—is the flaw in all social-contract thinking. If he were right, every member of the human race would need a separate island, and heaven knows what our ecological problems would be then.

Perhaps, after all, we had better count our blessings.

<sup>14</sup> See particularly *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, part 3, "Of Old and New Tables," and *The Joyful Wisdom* (otherwise called *The Gay Science*), p. 125 (the Madman's Speech). I have discussed this rather mysterious appointment of man to succeed God in a paper called "Creation and Originality", published in a volume of my essays called *Heart & Mind: The Varieties of Moral Experience* (Harvester Press, 1981).