

This was in fact the essence of Marx's later criticism of 'bourgeois' or egoistic rights. For Marx, as for many social thinkers, the notion of a 'right' is centred in a morality that is atomistic and individualistic, concentrating on the demands of the single person, and forgetting the general good of the society within which the individual is necessarily situated.

Yet for other liberal thinkers, this is exactly what is good about it (and just look at the abysmal history of communist states where the notion of individual rights had little or no place). Rights, they argue, protect us against the encroachments of the society. Even in a democracy, a minority can need protection against the tyranny of the majority. Even if insisting on rights can be egoistic, and shrill, and sometimes insensitive, still, we need the notion. We need it to describe our dependencies and our need for protection from the predations of others, including the others in their collective or political guise. Even if it is foolish to dwell on an inflated list of rights on going into a marriage, yet each partner does have rights against the other, and when they are badly infringed, redress and correction are required.

Ethics

Part Three

Foundations

It is time to pick up some unfinished business. In Part One, I tried to deflect some of the hostile thoughts many people voice about ethics. But we had to acknowledge the threat of relativism, and nihilism, and scepticism. We might still fear that the voice of conscience is a delusion. We might still flounder when we try to gain some sense of its authority. Are truth and knowledge possible, or does reasoning about what to do eventually hinge on nothing but brute will? Or are there yet other alternatives?

16. Reasons and foundations

Suppose we imagine an ordinary, everyday reason for acting. The everyday reason might be 'I wanted it', or 'I liked him (so I did something for him)', or 'That's what will make the most money'. A reason might be narrowly selfish, or it might be highly admirable: 'It helps to promote the greatest happiness of the greatest number' or 'It delivers people from horrendous pains and miseries'. These last two would be the reasons benevolent people offer for actions.

These reasons can be appealing. If our sympathies lie in the same direction, we will appreciate them and accept them. They work in many conversations. But there is no proof that they *have* to work. It seems to depend how much the audience sympathizes with us, or