

## Don't mess with the noumenon

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Clive Hamilton is nothing if not a man of conviction. So for him to confess to some serious rethinking about his position is in itself a tantalising inducement to read what he has to say. But *The Freedom Paradox* is not just an exercise in reappraising the intellectual territory that he traversed during his years as Director of the Australia Institute. It is an audacious attempt to build a metaphysics of morals that transcends Kant and Schopenhauer, puts Rawls in his place, reconciles the wisdoms of the East and West and puts a notion of the universal Self at the heart of a workable post-secular ethics. No task for the faint-hearted. What makes it doubly interesting is that Hamilton has typically written in the mode of a polemicist albeit an insightful and intellectually sophisticated one who has, in books like *Silencing Dissent*, *Scorcher* and *Affluenza*, directed his energies towards improving public policy or launching quixotic assaults on despoilers of innocence and the common good.

In *The Freedom Paradox* the passion and conviction remain, but he is also working hard at constructing a respectable philosophical argument in the technical, academic mode. It will be interesting to see how the philosophers in the academy respond. Hamilton does not blanch at telling us that his kind of post-secular ethics "transcends the rationalism of all modern theories of morality ... avoid[s] the vacuous claims of relativism, provides a metaphysical structure that allows for true agency ... gives us our moral adviser as well as our moral judge and ... offers a compass to guide us through the ethical confusions of the contemporary world". He is very systematic in the way he goes about his task. The book is divided across five parts into 45 sections, each succinctly articulated and all carefully sequenced. Even the occasional digressions what philosopher could resist a few words about death or the existence of God? feel just right. It is one of Hamilton's gifts that he writes as if he genuinely seeks to engage his reader in conversation. To this extent, the book works like a collection of well-connected, educative essays as well as a treatise something which non-philosophers should appreciate. He begins in familiar territory, among the discontented citizens of affluent countries, who "collaborate in their own subordination" to consumer capitalism. Hamilton is scathing about a society characterised by "an ever devouring conformity flimsily camouflaged by a veneer of confected individuality". What seems especially invidious is that "the structures that prevent us from flourishing have lodged themselves in our psyches". We may have individual and political freedoms, but unhappiness and alienation are widespread because we lack inner freedom. The task is to liberate ourselves from this condition. Hamilton prescribes an approach with a long philosophical pedigree. "We cannot be truly free, without committing ourselves to a moral life". This is Rousseau's account of liberty as obedience to a law which we prescribe ourselves. It is redolent of much classical and Enlightenment philosophy, and is a theme being renewed by contemporary moral philosophers like Charles Taylor and Alasdair MacIntyre. The trick, of course, is to ensure that a morality of self-prescribed laws does not merely grant licence to do whatever one

fancies. This would result in precisely the kind of libertarianism that Hamilton abhors and regards as a core contributor to the malaise of postmodern consumer society. Rather, Hamilton seeks to build a moral framework that is grounded in a concept of human essence and motivates behaviour that will honour it. Only then will we live meaningful lives. The question of happiness remains, for Hamilton, a second-order consideration. German Idealism and its transcendent elements in particular provides the launching pad for Hamilton's inquiry into metaphysics. He does well to render its difficult concepts and complex arguments sufficiently intelligible to communicate his own purposes. Consciousness is the starting point it creates "the distinction between subject and object the knower and the known", and "everything we know must be mediated by consciousness". The world as we know it is mediated by our senses, and conforms to the categories of space, time and causality that we bring to it. This is the world of appearances the "phenomenal" world to be contrasted with the "noumenal world" of the "thing-in-itself", that transcends consciousness and "lies behind" appearance and representation. Hamilton regards as fundamental and morally significant the distinction between "the phenomenal world of things as they appear to us and the noumenal world of the thing-in-itself, sometimes known as the 'subtle essence' in Eastern philosophy". Important too is the existence of "a different form of knowledge a 'non-sensible intuition' that transcends the subject-object distinction and allows us to 'know' something of the noumenon or subtle essence". It is this "non-sensible intuition" and access to the "noumenon" that become the fundamental elements of the post-secular ethics which Hamilton ultimately prescribes. Along the way, Hamilton rejects Kant's attempt to ground morality in reason, citing Schopenhauer that "reasonable and vicious are quite consistent with each other; in fact only through their union are great and far-reaching crimes possible". Rationality belongs to the "phenomenal" world of appearances, the realm of causality, and cannot provide a source of moral authority. Freedom "must have its own cause", its source lying "outside the realm of causality that is, in the noumenon". Morality, therefore, must be similarly sourced. Hamilton goes to considerable lengths to bring his readers to an appreciation of the noumenon and how to access it. He offers a vivid thought experiment, whereby we imagine passing

along a secret

passage into the citadel of the noumenal world in which we know everything "directly that is, completely unmediated by our senses, feelings or cognition ... there is no sensory or intellectual barrier between ourselves and the (noumenal) world". In the citadel "knowledge does not appropriate things: it participates in them". He quotes passages from Sartre's *Nausea*, extracts from Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey* and aspects of Zen Buddhism to convey the experience of "pure consideration", a transcendent awareness "unmediated by any phenomenal form" the kind of immanent, fleeting sense of the veil being lifted. Hamilton regards as a key insight Schopenhauer's conclusion that "since each knowing subject exists inside a body, and each body has a double existence once as phenomenon and once as noumenon we can know the thing-in-itself directly, unmediated by the senses and the intellect". Hamilton argues that this capacity to understand ourselves as both appearance and noumenon engenders humanity's moral sense, and warrants an effort to construct moral rules that recognise and reinforce that capacity. "When we adopt a moral attitude to another person we relate to them noumenally rather than phenomenally". From here, Hamilton unfolds the notion of the "universal Self" in which all humans participate as the ultimate subject, and reminds us of the equivalent insights from Hindu, Buddhist, Sufi and Christian traditions. He makes the case that when we identify with the universal Self we recognise the "participation of the self in others", and this gives rise to a "metaphysical empathy" which forms "the grounds of morality and the basis of the moral self". This metaphysical empathy manifests itself in the phenomenal world as compassion and voluntary justice. The section "The moral self" includes a simple and moving account of its essence and the way we respond to its demands, as well as being a testament to the noumenon. "When we have behaved in a way that falls short of our ethical standards we do not cry out, 'Oh, my God, I have violated universal law, contravened the agreement I reached behind the veil of ignorance, or breached the social contract'. No, we say, 'I have let myself down; I have gone against my better nature', and that better nature is the moral self. It is the arbiter, the inner judge, who speaks to us with an immediacy and authority no external legislation or contract can possess." Hamilton explores the concrete implications of his style of ethics with discussions around such morally charged

issues as suicide, casual sex, and bestiality. He ponders the task of becoming good, and of putting moral theory into practice, and concludes his book with a section entitled "Freedom rediscovered" (to which he attaches a Sufi saying: Freedom is the absence of choice). He revisits the malaise of modernity the freedom to do as we please, which is "the most subtle form of unfreedom ever conceived". The antidote is "inner freedom, the freedom to act according to one's own considered will" provided, of course that the will belongs to a self grounded in the noumenon, the universal Self. Only when we act in that way do we "rid ourselves of all influences and coercions, all determinations ... secular or divine". For Hamilton, finding that freedom involves a "metaphysical-psychological path in which the objective of the 'work' is to overcome our subjectivity". This nevertheless entails acknowledging our debt to the collective, and "consciously repaying it, rather than being unwittingly bound by the forces of the collective". Great art, he argues, can assist us in our journey to authenticity because true artists can translate the vision of the noumenon into a painting or a poem or a piece of music, thereby rendering it more available to us. In his preface, Hamilton declares that *The Freedom Paradox* focuses on the personal rather than the political. Yet the political is woven into many of its pages, and is a valuable element of it. At one point he cites Marx's famous dictum about philosophers interpreting the world rather than changing it, and insists that "a theory of morality must be persuasive beyond the academy: it must reverberate in the population". I suspect some of the technical philosophical aspects of *The Freedom Paradox* will ignite sparks in the academy; but Hamilton will certainly find a receptive audience among those many souls, not only his "downshifters", for whom happiness demands a meaningfulness that postmodern consumerism denies them. Hamilton has recently been appointed Professor of Public Ethics at the Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics, a joint centre of the Australian National University, Charles Sturt University and the University of Melbourne. This is wonderful news for all who wish to see the academy brought more forcefully into publicly engaged intellectual life. Hamilton is a lucid writer, a gifted and witty speaker, and a passionately concerned citizen. Fortunate are those for whom Hamilton will be their teacher. Brenton Holmes lives and works in Canberra and writes on culture, society and politics.

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