

Sins of Judgment

by Julien Combray (October 2017)



The Witches lead Macbeth to his demise in *Macbeth and the Armed Head* by Fuseli.

“Who are you to judge?” Few other questions or phrases capture so much of the ethos of our time in so economical a fashion. The question drives straight to, or rather derives straight from, the core of modern thinking about man: he is an individual, each unique unto himself, and should be free to do as he pleases so as to give expression to that individuality. This freedom of expression carries with it an implied freedom from coercion, thus providing us with the sole constraint we are comfortable imposing on human behaviour, our

one moral imperative: thou shalt not harm others. What it lacks in grandeur it supposedly compensates for in certainty. And though it may make for an effective democratic law, it seems woefully inadequate as a personal morality. Is this really the only basis for moral judgment? If not, how did it come to be that people began thinking in these terms?

The impediments to judgment today are many. The most prominent ones, at least the ones I encounter most frequently, are on the one hand the fervid belief in freedom and equality, and on the other hand a disbelief in any meaningful concept of human nature. These views are in some sense connected, in some sense at odds. For if one denies the existence of human nature, of a natural good for man, then perhaps it follows that all people should be equally free to pursue their own personal idea of the good. Yet if human beings are truly equal, they must be equal with respect to some enduring characteristics native to all men, and thus there must be some meaningful standard by which they can be measured.

Belief in the fundamental equality of men is, as everyone knows, a cardinal virtue of our time. To question the legitimacy of this virtue, or even the legitimacy of the different ways it manifests itself in society, is to reveal yourself as a potential enemy of the people. Being an enemy of the people was always dangerous, of course, but a people armed with Twitter presents a new species of danger. If a mob of people wanted to pillory you (or worse) in the past, they were at least forced to leave their sofas. Tweeting demands no such efforts. Should you be famous enough (or your transgressions egregious enough) to begin trending on Twitter then it is already too late, for voices are added exponentially as more people become aware of the trend. Suddenly it can appear as if an entire country is united in an impassioned condemnation of this person or that event when in reality, a lot of people simply clicked the same button. Surely such a power is dangerous, to say nothing of the way that the process misrepresents the relative importance of various issues. Faced with a fear of

reputational death by a thousand clicks, many choose to keep any doubts or reflections on this subject to themselves.

In the absence of such reflection, we have the habit of extending the belief in equality into all aspects of life. Such a habit results not only from an eagerness for neat solutions in areas of great ambiguity, but also from a desire for the feelings of moral grandiosity on the cheap. These feelings, historically the reserve of those willing to endure some degree of self-abnegation, are apparently obtainable by the application of principles to cases where they obviously do not apply. The process works something like this: take your egalitarian principle and apply it indiscriminately, then feel the tension between the universal ideal and the particular instances of reality, and in forcing yourself to believe the former despite evidence to the contrary contained within the latter, you will feel you have won a great struggle in the name of justice. In an age which takes so few moral problems seriously, such opportunities are understandably coveted.

But that isn't entirely fair. Though it is true that ours is an age characterized by a narrowing of the horizon of moral questions, the problem, from one perspective at least, seems to have more to do with a simplifying of the range of moral solutions. In other words, when you begin to think about all questions of judgment in terms of the approved means by which to make judgments, suddenly all questions of judgment seem to be about the same thing. It's a bit like the way in which when armed only with a hammer, everything begins looking like a nail.

To illustrate what I have in mind, perhaps it would be helpful to provide an example, one both comical and instructive. I was recently engaged in a discussion with someone about mundane subjects when suddenly the conversation turned to morality. The person with whom I was speaking, well-educated and quite canny in his professional life, brought up the example of bestiality. We both agreed the activity was

at least morally questionable, and I asked him on what grounds he objected to it. His response left me nonplussed at the time, though I have since found the appropriate response in laughter: he said that it is immoral to copulate with an animal because the animal cannot consent. Any questions?

The lesson I took from this experience, and it has been confirmed for me in subsequent discussions, is that people have lost the habit of thinking about questions of behaviour, particular the behaviour of others, in any terms other than those which are politically acceptable. We live in a time when it is difficult for people, especially the educated, to take religion seriously. Since the moral universe was previously the domain of religion, the average person is left in a position of uncertainty regarding the foundations of his moral experiences. For surely he still has them. The person who objected to bestiality on the grounds of non-consent experienced a clear revulsion at the idea, yet he had no moral framework in which to make sense of it. When I asked him to justify his condemnation of the act, he had two popular options, both of which I've seen used: dismiss the visceral reaction as a prejudice, as a sort of residuum left over from before man reached the Age of Enlightenment, or justify the revulsion within the unassailable framework of the rights of freedom and equality. Noticing that animals lack personhood, the perspective from which one can use the word "I" and thus give consent, he opted for the latter choice. He didn't consider that a lack of personhood also makes one ineligible for such freedoms and rights, or that such an argument entails the existence of slavery and murder on a mass scale, perpetrated by corporations like Perdue and its ilk.

These things didn't really matter, of course, for the person with whom I spoke didn't really believe his own explanation. But then we are left to wonder, what justifies his, or our, feelings of moral revulsion? Perhaps science will discover the answer to this question, as many people believe evolutionary biology is bound to do. Or perhaps the wisdom of the past, those attempts, both religious and

philosophic, which took seriously the idea that man possesses a nature, and that though he may choose to act against it, his happiness depends on self-knowledge and self-governance, took us closer to the truth of our moral predicament and provided a better foundation from which to build an ethics. But who knows. Besides, who am I to judge?

Julien Combray works reluctantly for a French investment bank. He was educated in America and briefly considered a career in academia before abandoning the idea for no apparent reason. He writes on subjects of philosophy and western culture and can often be found taking two hour lunch breaks in cafes throughout London.

To help support *New English Review*, donate [here](#).