

Morality — The Good Conscience of Class Society

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I. On bourgeois freedom, its limits, and how these limits are affirmed by a moral attitude

The couple of things that really matter in capitalist society and its democratic state are not made contingent on people’s subjective views about them, on whether people approve. No allowance is made in the institutions of a constitutional state or elsewhere that those “affected” might provide all their services and obedience in a calculating or conditional way, i.e., revoke them at any time.

In the factories of a modern nation, for example, “work ethic” has become an alien concept: the services that are worth paying wages for are programmed into the means of production — as a “technological constraint” that leaves little room for decision on the part of the employed workers. As for making themselves totally available to the “labor market” and “employers,” modern people have no decision at all to make; this is taken care of by the economic “necessity” of earning money and the welfare state’s alternative of miserable living conditions. The state, whose laws put all economic constraints into effect, is not about to leave it up to anyone’s private opinion whether its decisions are respected. Administration and police make a life and livelihood outside the state-defined rights and duties impossible; they do not make their services toward a bourgeois life for all individuals a matter of choice for anyone. A modern government authority does not compete with alternative preferences of its citizens, but settles affairs supremely by acts of state. Everything works fine without politicians having to talk their masses of eligible voters into doing what they are supposed to. Not even politicians themselves, much less business managers, have to be devoted with all their heart to their “tasks” for the accumulation of wealth and the political co-opting of the population to take their course. The competition between those in charge prevents any lack of “need for achievement” on the part of an important player from thwarting the purposes that count. The political force wielded by the modern state, and the social interests this force puts in place, determine the relevant actors’ will in such a way that they no longer appear to be effects of rule, but rather indispensable preconditions for what the administered masses are out to do. The constraints brought to bear by the state power and by the capitalist economy are as unquestionable as facts of nature — which, paradoxically, brings the *freedom of the individual* onto the scene to regard all these taken-for-granted living conditions as means that everyone is simply dependent on. They offer themselves as a suitable infrastructure — for leading a bourgeois life that is fairly free of restrictions. No democratic ruler dictates to its citizens what job to do, where to live, or what kind of family to have; arbitrary rule has been replaced by the principle of legal certainty. Each person sets out, under these conditions, to do what matters to *him* — and doesn’t need to let anyone order him around. The achievement of the banknote and the permissible ways of acquiring it, the free housing market along with social assistance, the office of vital records, and rubrics such as ‘married’ and ‘children’ for income tax purposes are made available to individuals as means for exercising their freedom. In this way, everyone in the bourgeois class-state and its economy faces a world full of *opportunities*, even if they seem rather unevenly distributed.

These opportunities, however, have the slight catch that they can't be made use of at will; all too many people are familiar with the experience of failing to attain their big or small goals in life. And an objective appraisal could easily show that the opportunities offered them are only the way to make them serve the purposes of class society and its public power. Money and competition, rental apartments and pay slips, ID and social security cards are definitely practical things — just not for whatever a free individual might want, and certainly not for the material needs of those people who walk through life as wage and salary earners, comprehensively looked after and made to be useful. Those things are the instruments of business and state power, which thwart the materialism of the masses, who are therefore also called the “little guys.” The conditions for a bourgeois existence in no way bring about their success, but rather guarantee the domination of capital and the sovereignty of the law. And that is fairly adverse to the interests of wage workers and other ordinary citizens. Though people are indeed *free* to make use of the economic and political means of life in a modern society, for most people that is *ruinous*.

Opportunities that hinder and prevent success in life: that is a contradiction that takes some coping with. Of course, those concerned could take it as an indication of the prevailing purposes that are inherent in their supposedly so neutral living conditions; and they would be wise to do so. For that would put the conflict of interests organized by the law-enforcing authority right on the agenda, and they would only need to win the class struggle. But that would mean abolishing this strange paradox and not constructively “coping” with it.

The productive alternative gets going by way of a mistake on the part of those affected. Individuals who fail to achieve their freely chosen aims with the available opportunities *become skeptical*, not of the deceptive “means,” but *of their own materialism*. It is not the unwieldy conditions of their existence they call into question, but rather their way of dealing with these anything but boundless possibilities. And they take the same view of other people whose interests are in the way. They, too, are faced with the burning question of whether their successful or failed efforts are all right or not.

This question does not examine what one's own plans or the life agenda of others are actually about. Instead, one sets off in search of a justification that is or is not ascribed to all kinds of actions. Beyond all the specific features to be detected in a transaction, a job, a wedding, a policy measure, etc., this procedure always discovers the same quality of a good or a bad purpose, a distinctive goal, as it were, that is supposed to be decisive for all (mis-)deeds in the world. The standard brought to bear for the moral judgment produced in this way is called a *value*, and it has precious little to do with the hard economic measure of material wealth that goes by the same name.

It is not hard to identify the need guiding the construction of this ideal criterion for all doings. It emanates from *righteous people* who orient themselves by what is allowed or prohibited, who always are busy trying to succeed in life within the framework of the valid, socially required means — and who notice that this brings them into conflict with their contemporaries. The ideal they concoct from such adverse dependencies is that of a *common good*, to which the conflicting and yet so interdependent interests have something to contribute. Their own readiness to submit to the “rules” of state and market figures as a merit, which they demand from everyone else as a duty. In this way, modern people, against all experience, are skilled at starting out from a *positive relation* between all possible concerns and making this viewpoint obligatory for themselves and others, because they are willing to let themselves in for the real conflicts they feel the effects of.

This strange sort of (self-)criticism follows the example set by the constitutional state, whose claim and practice it is to first *allow*, or not, all interests and needs to compete over the necessary means in accordance with the law, setting its force against some while lending it to others. Everyone must put up with being treated as a party and being sovereignly put in his place vis-à-vis a higher interest. But modern citizens won't be treated as humble subjects of the law just like that. They take the liberty of getting ahead of the restrictions imposed on them by asking about their own *inner standards* of what is allowed or prohibited and playing their own supervisory authority.

So free people agree to view *being of service as the epitome of their free will*. After all, acting according to aims set by others is *service*. Doing that voluntarily, respecting others' interests as a matter of principle, means *being of service*. Confronting a person with the question of whether his own purposes are really to conform with (all) others takes for granted that a free will is only worth something if it *acknowledges it is of service*.

This acknowledgement, whether one demands it of oneself or of others or others demand it of one, is the opposite of recognizing that modern people are of service by freely making use of their state-guaranteed living conditions: that they are keeping up the turnover of money and commodities, a system of wage labor, a state apparatus acting with sovereign power at home and abroad, and similar "institutions" in which everything is an expedient means long before individuals come along with their life planning — and en masse look pretty foolish with it. It would be off-topic to take questions like "What is the purpose of life?" or "What are my real aims?" seriously as theoretical inquiries and answer them by analyzing market activities and state power, and this would also prompt the accusation of cynicism. After all, it would lead straight back to the depths of the concrete constraints and clashes of interests, whereas what is at issue is the exact opposite: the idea of an ultimate purpose that reaches beyond all real failures and that co-opts every poor bugger as a free advocate of values that are intrinsically incapable of failure.

Proper skepticism about one's own and other people's *will* thus, terribly fundamentally, calls for a "*should*" in whose name a free person can actually dare to act at all. It is with this modal verb that morality comes into being.

II. On desolate efforts to use morality as a lever for failing interests

A person with morals has no new needs and — initially — no different practical worries than he had before. He has an additional concern: he won't have it said that his interests and hardships are "*only*" *his*. He puts the needs that he really has, and the way he really has them, in critical relation to a fictitious universal that is supposed to match them: he interprets them as *rights and duties*.

The guideline for determining this relation is provided by bourgeois law — not the letter of the law, but its principle. The fact that clashes of interests and collisions between individual concerns and prescribed rules aren't to be settled and disposed of once and for all, but are rather supposed to persist and continue their effects according to a binding decree "from above"; and the fact that the deciding authority demands to be recognized by all disputing parties as the unimpeachable precondition for their disputed interests when it dictates victory or defeat to them: this *cynicism of the law* finds its most expansive practical application in the

morality of those affected. Nobody wants to come out with his interests without at the same time acting as advocate for all the purposes and institutions he is coming into conflict with, and supposedly being a nonpartisan arbitrator who only wants the best for all concerned. And this is supposed to help everyone present his needs and concerns all the more grandly and successfully. The other side of the modesty of mistrusting every interest, including one's own, as a base urge as long as no universal value has been found for it to serve is the demand that everyone else be open to and compliant with one's own presented interest in the name of the universal value one has discovered. In their own best, i.e., also morally reflected, interest, they are supposed to let themselves be co-opted for the purposes of their adversary. Landlords raise the rent so that they can continue to offer their tenants every conceivable amenity— upright tenants resist by pointing to the benefits that the landlord derives from their first-class tenant manners. Unions demand wages, if at all, solely to make sure that factory owners have solvent consumers to sell their goods to — employers cut wages and workforce to enable some to keep their jobs and others to someday earn their daily bread when the economy booms again. Individual wage-earners insist that their earnings reflect their merit and remind their superiors of the extravagant benefits that the department and the company derive from their work — management hands back the same lie, declaring it impossible for a person to earn more than he merits. Administrators of social services cut pensions to keep them secure — those affected cite their previous selfless services, as if they had to rebut the suspicion of being greedy for not wanting to have to start paying for health insurance out of their monthly check. Everybody appeals to the *common good* — the basic category of morality, which doesn't designate any specific thing but rather a method for producing the semblance of universal validity for a particular interest.

The clashes of interests that are steadfastly denied this way thrive magnificently under the banner of the common good. Denying these antagonisms and constantly co-opting the opposing side doesn't mean abandoning one's own aims; and it is the opposite of trying to get to the bottom of a conflict, so that one or another point of contention could be settled by someone recognizing his foolishness, and more important points could be dealt with in the way the real constellation of interests requires. A moral view raises all conflicts to a new level by offering all kinds of levers for continually attempting to beat hostile interests at their own game, namely, with a *semblance of universal validity*, which the opposing side — just as morally — equally subscribes to and equally uses itself. That the opposing side is wrongly doing so and therefore automatically disqualifying itself is already clear from the fact that one is making this claim oneself; one accuses the other side of hypocrisy and then demonstrates one's own integrity, and vice versa. Because that goes back and forth, the next moment each one is arbitrating this accusation again, thereby moving away from the rather easy insight that hypocrisy is always in play on all sides — because it is in no way the opposite of morality, but rather the *demand that the other side be moral*. Instead, each one wants to be believed somehow for something that he easily sees through in the other, but obviously only because it's the adversary. This is how one virtuous person cries foul to another — which definitely makes each side more committed and more bitter. It definitely doesn't make for more success, since what decides the outcome of a dispute between antagonistic interests in a bourgeois society is the instruments of power that the parties in dispute have, and the weight that the real “arbiter,” the state authority, gives a social interest according to law and political expediency. In things that matter, the state authority and the business world don't rely for a moment on moral claims, either on their own grandstanding skills, or especially on those of others. In their affairs with each other, “ordinary people” proceed the same way, as far as they are able. And it is not just in sports that the public has long become accustomed to distinguishing real success from the question of whether a victory was deserved.

But that doesn't mean people refrain from asking such a question. On the contrary, practical failure and the experience of how ineffective moral claims are for advancing practical interests spur on the constant worry about whether it's actually okay when the desired success comes to nothing, or if this is not terribly unfair. Though not explained, the failure would somehow be justified if one has neglected to take account of the common good or breached one's duties. Conversely, if a search of one's conscience reveals that all value standards and methodological requirements have been met, then an interest, though not satisfied, is validated beyond all failure. Though not really acknowledged, it is then proven to be worthy of acknowledgement and persists at least virtually as a good claim.

Such matters of conscience are not decided by a look at law books. Moral people want to achieve their successful justifications above all vis-à-vis their inner self, vis-à-vis their self-chosen and freely acknowledged binding values. This private mimicking of bourgeois law is even supposed to be the actual, true archetypal law; one makes the entire world of real law and practiced justice for its part subordinate to one's own imaginary court decisions — the more doggedly the more this world goes against one's own interests and sense of right and wrong.

Viewing oneself as a victim of one undeserved defeat after the other, as many people thus inevitably do, moves very few to embrace a career as a politician to make the world a better place. Far more frequently, this view triggers a “criminal career” — and is actually necessary for becoming a decent criminal. A good number of honorable members of society resort to thievery to procure a few material comforts that are out of their price range but they are definitely entitled to according to their honest view of themselves. Some actually go through with the fond idea of committing a revenge foul against a company or “intimate partner” that, in their considered opinion, has made it impossible for them to attain some aspiration or other by lawful means. The “criminal energy” thus released is fed by a disappointed and insulted sense of justice and a materialism that has degenerated to the resolve to recoup one's losses.

However, then too, and especially when one gets nabbed, one's experience with the law and with other people's hypocrisy promotes above all the art of moral grumbling, of embitterment, and of edification.

III. On the compensatory need for morality: conscience, responsibility, and resigned displeasure with the world and oneself

Everybody admits to some character flaw that he has happened to develop. This self-accusation that otherwise uncomplicated minds tend to introduce themselves with is regularly uttered in such a way that there is no mistaking the “but.” For it is infallibly aimed at those moral offenses that the person claims to be most certainly *not* guilty of. For example, he “has never accepted anything for free” all his life, instead “been through everything” but remained unbending. Or he goes in for practical jokes but can't stand dishonesty and is proud of being able to “look anybody straight in the eye.” The German working class praises itself — in the form of the trade union press — for the sacrifices and hard work it put into rebuilding the nation; many a grandma never wanted a single thing for herself but “always only gave.” And one thing nobody ever wants to be is a crude show-off.

Among the masses in a class society, the interest in one's own morality is evidently so lively that it splits off from one's material interests and any calculations to draw benefit, however misguided they are, and becomes a heartfelt concern of its own. Honest people act — especially when asked — as if they were constantly busy pursuing lofty values and not in the least concerned with any vile expectations of gain. For every thing they do they can cite some honorable principle that they are fulfilling — or else violating; and that is supposed to be the essence of what they are doing.

The activists of honorable life maxims get nothing from this except for an image of themselves that approaches their own personal ideal of human excellence, but that they get. When someone stumbles over some need that ruins this peculiar utility value, he hears the prickly "*voice of conscience*"; once he has "come to terms with himself" again, he is content and cheerful *feelings* arise. Modern citizens do not just think good thoughts on occasion and then let them go — they *become* moral.

This of course applies all the more to their diplomatic relations with the rest of the world. Interest in the morality of others likewise has a strong tendency to forget the materialism for which the honorary titles of the common good are supposed to co-opt all well-meaning fellow humans. Material claims, which have gone by the wayside anyway, are displaced by the air of a responsibility which stops at nothing. Absolutely everything and everyone is judged by the standards that are seen as obvious higher viewpoints for setting goals — no longer for the sake of the set goals, but only for the sake of the standards themselves. No matter what other people do and why they do it — all their doings are correlated with moral values and taken as the program of conforming to or contradicting these values. There need not be any actual effects on one's own well-being that one attributes to another person's good or evil intentions, as his will to be good or bad.

This way of judging, which is based on the fiction that all human action is about upholding moral principles, becomes so much second nature to modern people that it even gets imprinted on their emotional life and turns all materialistic distinctions between what is important and what isn't upside down. Parents, for example, manage to be *ashamed* of their children — here there is at least a connection, albeit not one involving material needs; the children thus answered for get to feel the effects of that shame. Intellectuals are often just as honestly ashamed of their countrymen abroad; the morality at work here has incorporated the abstraction of nationality into the image of one's own integrity. But *outrage* is also called for when an attack is committed by perverted guerrilla commandos, although one neither knows their aim nor will ever come in any contact with them; and this noble emotion is not merely required, but actually felt. The virtue of *envy*, which means being bothered by other people's undeserved advantages although they don't put one at any disadvantage, even presupposes doing without an improvement in one's own position — one is virtually put to shame by gifts. People and interests that are thought to lack noble motives but rather to be driven by badness are the brunt of *contempt*, an imaginary lynch law, which is never allowed to be put into practice in a constitutional state except in the elated feeling of righteous *indignation* — in this way the now selfless interest in other people's decency even affords pleasure. Faced with innocent people, preferably children whose big eyes stand for the moral principle of harmlessness, one is prepared to be *moved* and feel *compassion*. It is less common to harbor honest admiration, when somebody is being paraded around as an acknowledged monument to altruism — this touches too closely on one's moral self-image, creates a "bad conscience." But grown-up people do behave as fans when it comes to a recognized purpose and its successful proponents, and the value of role models is indisputable. The self-sufficing comparison of one's own morality with the unscrupulous way of the world is complete when

all that is left is pride in not being fooled by hypocrisy any more, but instead seeing through everything: a *disinterested condemnation*, which still involves a willingness to find every new case of immorality interesting. A little paradox in passing: this willingness, known as *curiosity* in English, is called “Neugier” in German, literally “lust for what is new,” of all things.

Despite all the anti-materialism they practice, moral people do come up with one demand on society, its authorities and its members, with a self-produced practical need. They want recognition — if not of their interests, then all the more of their morals, with which they negate their interests and instead show responsibility. However, because everyone strives for the compensatory satisfaction of *distinguishing* themselves when it comes to virtue, responsible citizens reproduce, in spheres far removed from material matters, an interpersonal performance comparison that almost outdoes the one capital conducts. Such conflicts of the third kind, which quite normal people open up and doggedly fight through against each other, gain in meanness by being accompanied more than ever by the hypocrisy of most selfless agreeableness.

With such competition in matters of moral integrity, modern people customarily whop each other and themselves pretty soundly. This is the arena for the fight for self-assurance, on which everything else famously depends, from goals scored to orgasms, from one’s career to exam grades. When pride in oneself is denied any positive echo and suffers defeats in the fight of comparison, one may have ever so much contempt for the incompetence and unworthiness of one’s contemporaries, who fail to acknowledge the best among them — one still has doubts about one’s own personality. Conversely, successes raise the bar that a virtuous person definitely doesn’t want to miss; and because the competition never sleeps, there’s bound to be the “fall” that they will afterwards say “pride” came before. The daily appeal to civilized mankind to hang loose, relax, and be happy — along with Christmas and Carnival — goes perfectly with the basic moral feeling of trudging through everyday life insulted by others and displeased with oneself. It sets yet another new standard, which is not at all easy to meet. “I can’t just let go and laugh!” — this kind of self-accusation, along with the expectation of a bit of consolation, is already mastered by adolescents in a morally fully-developed society.

No wonder some members of this circus see the real brutalities of the capitalistic world of work, which doesn’t give a damn about the pitfalls of moral self-awareness, almost as a holiday from the mental cruelties of private life. The trouble is that it is at work that the rejection of normal human materialism *takes place*, while the compensation of this rejection fails so stunningly in private life.

IV. On the utility value of morality for the leaders of society and public life, for the mood of the country, and for the business of ‘criticism’

The delusion that moral ideas are an offer of obligatory life plans that are to be followed for their own sake is strongly promoted from above in a modern, democratic class society. Public opinion and culture deal with no other subject than the morality of all participants and of their works: and from the outset the only interest they accept is one in absolutely respectable circumstances.

This concern for the nation's convictions definitely also includes, in leading positions, those small minorities of a class society whose members do not need morality as a false emergency program for coping with the inevitable failure of their freedom. Particularly the people whose materialism is excellently served by the "practical constraints" of political power and free-market competition are called on to adopt a detached attitude toward their successful interests and to stand up for universal, higher purposes that they are supposedly in fact serving with their machinations. There is a clear enough distinction in capitalism between the private wishes of the people who have proper means, and the virtually objective laws by which these means yield profit, to leave room for a credible interpretation of their lofty handiwork as a service full of privations, which ultimately "doesn't allow for any private life at all."

Such declarations and the corresponding poses have a quite luxurious nature in the higher spheres of society. They are not the expression of an embarrassing effort to undo or sugarcoat everyday defeats by protesting to a fictitious higher authority. The hypocrisy and the intended interests are no less obvious, it is true. But when the real means are no problem for material success, when people basically have *no need* for moral posturing as a hopeful and pointless substitute for their advancement, the cheap suspicion that the hypocrisy is hypocritical and is only out of calculation isn't too convincing. These people take the liberty of *starting off* with the self-defined "problems" of self-awareness — which have more to do with self-enjoyment than with failed compensation. They are impressive, interesting, and worth their own society column in the newspapers for ordinary people. There is nothing more edifying than "failure" at freely chosen tasks, by luxurious standards and without any need, and nothing is as exemplary. Even suicide in such circles is known as "voluntary death" [German "Freitod"].

In their relations with the class-ordered world, those interests whose success doesn't require any moral entitlement even in some imaginary compensatory way, readily cite the same entitlement under which everyone shows interest in the world's morality in his own way, only they do so much more aggressively and much more credibly: as *responsibility*. Without any restriction or reservation, the asserted dominant interest is identical to the *duty* to look after everything — and the fact that the rest of the people are dependent on the dominant purposes "proves" that responsibility is more than a presumptuous attitude here. The brutal reality that some people really have the say on the livelihoods of numerous employees, on the poverty of entire areas, on the taxes and services their people owe, on the creditworthiness of entire nations, even on war and peace, is taken to be a moral burden, which the "little guy" is lucky to be spared — he gets to take part in it all the more enthusiastically in theory.

On the basis of this lie, all public voices in democracy work harmoniously together to never-endingly define "what is best for all," the resulting rights and duties for those in charge and other people, and the moral standards that both the former and the latter have to meet quite personally. The fact that this discussion has no practical relevance whatsoever is what makes for its unfailing appeal. Freedom reigns when it comes to constructing values whose realization is supposed to raise the "problems" that are then said to be the real ones that society, the state, the parties, and indeed everyone has. Some say that a nation whose capitalists are successfully setting out to conquer the world market and whose political power is just as successfully ensuring the necessary security is suffering through one *crisis* after another, because the reflux of capital or the legitimation of state actions seems deficient. Others issue the slogan "optimism," and confront a people they are making use of for some remarkable progress in preparing for world war, with congratulations on the good mood they are apparently not letting anything spoil.

Meanwhile, the church subsumes all world events under its diagnosis of disregard for unborn life. A peace movement contributes insights on the absence of inner peace in modern man, which has supposedly made its mark on all social institutions, even national defense. And above everyone sits enthroned a German president [von Weizsäcker] who keeps flogging the methodological principle of the whole debate — the lie that everyone is responsible for everything, summarized in the classic linguistic monument to the most brutal indiscriminate and to national discrimination, the famous “us” — so elegantly that no group in society has been able to make out any sources of friction; the offensive for patriotic morality satisfies everyone.

Under such patronage, public opinion busies itself with all kinds of competing, value-oriented blueprints for the world, which are not out to serve any particular material interest but instead arise from the free desire of various social factions to show responsibility and have an ennobling influence on people and conditions. Interest in everyone’s morals, posing as universal conscience, and competing to be respected for it, is not merely a popular private sport, it is the delight of public opinion — and thus an important instrument of democracy. Every citizen gets to wield all his skepticism and life experience to judge which competitor for the functions of rule he most likes to believe the hypocrisies of. And competing “opinion makers” themselves supply the standards for distinguishing those contributions to be taken seriously from frivolous ones. The former are characterized by a principle that has absolutely nothing to do with what they are about: they are recognizably not honest whims — that sort of thing quickly falls prey to ridicule — but rather *calculated* to have a propagandistic effect. Even the churches pick out the dogmas they want to impress people with (they’ve got plenty to choose from); otherwise they would be sects, which they can’t despise enough.

Without this art of calculated agitation it would hardly be possible to cultivate and satisfy the people’s morals as comprehensively as democratic public opinion manages to do. This firstly entails *spreading hype* that stays in tune with advances in the state’s actual agenda. A government that stages its policy of “reforms” as a humanitarian system of entitlements and is out to “do away with old-fashioned customs” will want to have virtues such as “active commitment” and “public spirit” stressed in the democratic canon, and sometimes even recommends showing understanding for demonstrators. Another government will condemn such a thing as “pressure from the street,” demand respect for every narrow-minded position, praise cheerful self-sacrifice, castigate all “entitlement mentality” — and thereby get itself the right echo for a policy that, for example, handles growing poverty increasingly through the semi-official charity system. How is a person brooding over morals to come up with what trend is currently required all by himself? When recommending honorable attitudes towards Turks and asylum seekers, the unemployed and US soldiers stationed in Germany, Russians and oil sheiks, etc., the manufacturers of images of friend and foe mustn’t be taken in by their own moral artifacts. If they don’t calculatingly “go with the times,” they might end up looking foolish when it is time to redefine *in practice* what has to be “the national interest” until further notice.

The other task that requires public hypocrites to be clever is the managing of criticism. This refers to both aspects: criticism must be raised in the right spirit, and there must also be an end to it. The first is managed with a little moral rigorism. Some principle or other, held on to with some stubbornness and the proper pose of unworldliness, is always good for showing someone up — and that is all criticism does, and is allowed to do, in free public life. When someone gets annoyed at a government policy, some effect of free-market business life, or the like, he is immediately taught, by being agreed with, that, strictly speaking, he’s not the one being harmed but rather a value, which he has to unselfishly serve when making his

objections. This is how discontent is channeled into the art of constructive complaint, and turned into an active commitment to doing things better. And anyone who fails to show this spirit has forfeited the right to grumble anyway. Conversely — and this is the rule in mature societies — partisan opinion-makers construct in just this constructive way annoyances that are intended to spur on nothing but the competition of opinions and moral factions. Anyone who likes may, as a private individual, make use of this as an offer to insert his private portion of misery into the public scandal and rediscover his own personal welfare cut in a public corruption affair, or his own housing problem in the Turk immigration “problem.” In the end, the criticized personalities have lost quite a bit of their “credibility.” This methodological category, which is out to judge a person’s skill in dealing with moral standards rather than whether he naively keeps to them, expresses very nicely the calculating character of the moralism that a “constructively critical” public opinion operates on itself.

Next, the public disgracing of important offices and persons will always be put right again, by means of a distinction whose proper use must also be learned and overseen: higher figures have to follow higher morals. People who use morals to gloss over a pretty major failure are quite willing to see that success requires a few ruthless actions that are normally forbidden; and when it comes to the success of morally good things, like the “common good” itself, then even the shabbiest trick is all right. The platitude that politics is “a dirty business” is not intended to discredit this sphere at all, but to make allowances for its operators being in an exceptional situation morally speaking. The grumbler has yet to be found who is not smitten with awe once he comes face to face with one of his rulers, the managers of the “dirty business,” if not before. Educated moralists can condemn the same embarrassment as a “double standard” or admire it as a “tragedy,” as required. And from the long history of moralism, they have distilled the fine distinction between “the ethic of ultimate ends,” a kind of mental exercise for observers and preachers on the sidelines, and the “ethic of responsibility,” the movers’ and shakers’ guideline that allows everything.

Anyone who dwells too long on “exposing” public hypocrisy — and especially criticizes, instead of acting disappointed and entertaining the public with scandals — will be accused of “fouling his own nest” or, as the educated put it, “being cynical.” For at the end of all justified criticism one must let the hypocrisy stand again, no matter how little credibility it has. This is demanded by the constructive side of morality itself: the obligation to maintain the fiction of making common cause with the disgraced opponent. This obligation is called tolerance; and the accusation of violating it is the harshest that a thoroughly moralistic free society has at its disposal. That is why good people immediately refute it by demonstrating that their “cynicism” was not real and they were actually most well-meaning. The charge of ‘intolerance’ shuts the accused out of the community of democrats who, on the seesaw of moral hypocrisy, subordinate their power of judgment to the imperative of compatibility. This accusation is the unmistakable way that democrats announce their intention to destroy an “enemy of freedom” that they’ve determined.