The Structure of the Foundational Moral Experience

We should now look more deeply into the psychology and nature of the foundational moral experience, into that which gives moral judgments their basis in reality and which gives us the awareness that we call moral. We will clarify its structure and make its nature more apparent.

Affecitivity. It is in the heart that morality has its birth. Ethics moves on to confirmatory reason and theory, to demonstrations of the coherence and truthfulness of one's positions; but it is in feeling that the roots of morality are found and nourished. The foundational moral experience is an affective response to value. It is not a metaphysical or a religious experience originally. It is not a conclusion to a syllogism, though it may subsequently be supported by syllogisms and reasoning. The value of persons cannot be taught, subjected to proof, reasoned to, or computerized. It can only be affectively appreciated.

There are a lot of practical consequences to this fact of life. Since moral knowledge begins in our affections and emotions, there will never be a discussion of a moral issue that does not have repercussions at the emotional level. We do not address moral issues dispassionately. That is why ethics is such a special and needed enterprise. It calls for bringing your intellect and your feelings and sensibilities and emotions into concert. It also requires that we listen sensitively and attentively to what others are saying and feeling. Moral discussions are never merely abstract and detached. There is always an emotional component since we are always speaking about what we are and what we ought to be. Morality is felt and not just coldly intuited.

Again, ethics is not just an exercise in feeling. We have to reason and argue and think with all possible clarity. However, when we say that moral knowledge begins in the affections, that its basis is in the heart-felt response to value, we are saying with John Dewey that feeling
is the "animating mold" of moral judgments. It is a good idea to know
that as we move into deeply felt differences in moral debate.

The foundational moral experience does not stop short with hu-
manity. It is marked by the discovery that all life, whether it be in
leaf, flower, bird, or beast, is awe-inspiring and a kind of miracle of
energy and purpose. Our reverence, then, must extend in some way
to all forms of life because all forms deserve esteem. Personal life is
discovered to be even more marvelous. Here are beings who are the
wonder of creation. Not only can they perceive what is and respond to
that; they can imagine what could be and bring it about. They can find
and create beauty. They can love. They can speak and sing and dance
and laugh. They can be merciful and compassionate. They can and
sometimes do transcend everything, even their own lives, in the phe-
nomenon of the supreme sacrifice. Anyone with any sensitivity should
be impelled to the affirmation that this life is uniquely precious. Words
such as "sacred" and "sublime" are needed to voice a sense of awe and
appreciation. However, the foundational moral experience that springs
from the depths of affectivity means more than our words can convey.
We are not just doing mathematics or science when we do ethics, for
here we are involved in the utterly serious work of making judgments
about what we, our lives, and all forms of life are worth. That is an
affective as well as an intellectual endeavor.

In a word, then, morality is birthed in affectivity. In saying that, we
are not advocating the position of emotivist ethicists who say that moral
judgments are nothing more than emotional reactions to particular
issues and not statements that could be true or false. Affectivity or
feeling initiates an awareness of moral meaning that is part of our
knowing experience.

Obviously, two persons who have profound affective experiences
of the value of human life could enter into serious intellectual disa-
greement about what does and does not befit that life. Just listen in
on a discussion about whether the United States needs an equal rights
amendment, national health insurance, gun control, or a constitutional
ban on abortion. In those discussions, you will hear both the passion-
ate affective base of morality and the reasoned arguments expressing
what people value in these matters. What is born in the heart is to
some degree expressible in the language of the mind, which interprets
and gives shape in different ways to the affective awareness of moral
value. Ethics, which starts in awe, proceeds to reason. There is no effort
here, then, to say that morality and ethics are just a matter of emoting.
In ethics we think about what we feel and both the thinking and the
feeling give us contact with reality.

Intelligent discourse on moral matters is indispensably necessary
for humane society although persons may not always agree with one
another. The problem of the Persian Emperor Darius I is an example of the perennial human problem concerning moral differences. He found that some of his Indian subjects ate their fathers’ corpses while the Greek subjects burned them. The pollution of holy fire was as shocking to the Indians as cannibalism was to the Greeks. And so we Greeks and Indians today, though united in reverence for life, are forever diverging on what does or does not befit that life. Intelligent, sensitive ethical debate is the human response to this divergence. Ethics is not just a matter of emotive preference even though we stress that the origins of moral awareness are in the affections. Ethics seeks after truth by argument, comparison, analysis, and by all the questioning and evaluational modes that we will develop beginning in Part Two.

*Faith.* The FME is not just a matter of feeling. It also involves a faith perception of moral value. That has to sound strange to most moderns in the Western world. Faith has a bad name in our modernity. To many it denotes unintellectual, superstitious religiosity. It is associated with a kind of naive and pre-scientific mindset. This prejudice is ultimately ungrounded since faith in a true sense makes the intellectual world go around. To be re-enfranchised, faith must be clearly defined.

Faith is a normal and basic way of knowing. Contrary to the common wisdom, seeing is not believing. Believing is *knowing* what you cannot see or prove, but what you still accept and hold with firmness. Belief is a kind of knowledge, although it differs from the empirical certainty of direct and immediate knowledge that we have of our embodied existence. Let us listen to an atheist, Jean-Paul Sartre, to know what we mean by faith as part of moral knowledge. Toward the end of his life, Sartre had an experience that he recounted with much eloquence. At the time he was at the pinnacle of his career — possibly the most widely read philosopher of his age. He met a young couple who had with them their infant child. Sartre took the child in his arms and later described his reaction. He said that he suddenly felt an overwhelming sense of reverence and awe. It struck him that if you took all his life’s philosophical work and put it on one side of a balancing scale and put the preciousness he held in his arms on the other, his life’s work would weigh almost as nothing compared to the inestimable gift of this child. Sartre couldn’t prove that the child was worth all that, but he knew *believingly* that his awe was not misplaced. Belief or faith may take religious forms, but before it does that it takes a moral form. It is part of what moral knowledge is. Without affective belief in the worth of life, moral ground would dissipate.

The truths that we hold in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States cannot be proved like mathematical formulas. We *believe* them and many will even die for them. The signers of the Declaration proclaimed that it is “self-evident” that all persons
are created equal. Would that it were! It is not self-evident. It is a belief, and, indeed, the foundational belief of this American republic. To Aristotle things were quite different. It was self-evident to him that all persons were not created equal and that women and slaves were inferior. Ironically, many of the framers of the Constitution agreed. What these semi-confused individuals did was to express a belief, a faith — although limited at that time — in the equality of people and their universal right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." They did not understand the full meaning of what they said. But their words went beyond their inchoate perception of the value of all persons; that is why a whole history of constitutional law has had to spell out slowly just what that founding belief fully implied. Abigail Adams, however, grasped part of that implication immediately. In a letter to her husband John, who was attending the Continental Congress, she wrote:

I long to hear that you have declared an independancy — and by the way in the new Code of Laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make I desire you would Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands. Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the Ladies we are determined to foment a Rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation.

The FME is a process that doesn’t happen all at once, as we shall stress in a moment. The words of these revolutionary Americans were grounded in a faith appreciation of what persons are. And that is the way with moral truth. It is a form of natural belief that’s deeply held and foundational. Religious persons might go on and explain this faith in religious language, but they are at one with atheists like Sartre in believing in the value of persons.

Life is full of faith-knowledge that has its source in affectivity. Every person in love knows this. You cannot explain or justify with reasons the insights of your heart, and yet you calmly believe that these make consummate sense. Faith-knowledge is also a way of trusting that is grounded in the affective awareness of truth. You are surer of your love than many things you see or can prove. How could anyone see or prove that love makes sense? It can only be taken on faith. Proving that persons are worth loving is as futile as trying to prove that life is worth living, for both are conclusions of belief or faith. We know these things and they are indeed among the things most worth knowing. Proving further that persons are worth dying for, or worth becoming less selfish for, is impossible, and yet we know it because faith is a way of knowing without proof. You cannot prove that persons are worth moral concern. What you can say to justify your faith is that life would
make no sense without it. Faith makes a solid claim to truth partly because its opposite seems absurd and unlivable.

In a sense, our affections are a divining power that goes further into reality than our reasoning minds can take us. Not only by the mind, to paraphrase Blaise Pascal, can we know truth, but also by the heart, for the heart has reasons that the mind cannot comprehend. Feeling is a way of knowing. We often feel and sense more than we can see or explain. Knowledge is basically sensitive awareness and in affectivity we become aware of many things that escape the cold light of unfeeling intellectuality. Faith is a species of this kind of knowing, and no one, including secular moderns, need be ashamed of it. It is simply intelligent to know this dimension of our minds. Love itself, and more specifically benevolent or unconditional love, is essential to human fulfillment. It is not calculating and based on advantage or hope of gain. Love and morality are works of faith, and never has there been genuine love that was not an adventure in faith. It can be rightly said that love is the consummation of morality and the beginning of ethics.

Faith is an interpretative, affective, knowing act. It is not knowledge of the sort that basks in self-evidence. What we accept on faith might even seem absurd. However, it may appear even more absurd not to believe. We cannot scientifically prove that persons are sacred in their worth. The foundational moral experience of the value of persons opens us to that belief. Thus, morality is born, and survives, and we build legal systems and nations upon it. The experience of the moral that we are presenting here admits the incapacity of reason in constituting the foundations of morality but not the impossibility of true knowledge or faith-knowledge.

Process. The foundational moral experience is a matter of more or less. Every human being is touched by it to some degree, and being touched by it starts a process that admits of moral growth that is, at times, tender and slow — and that can also decline. Process means that the foundational moral experience is not something handed down from one generation to the next like a genetic trait but that it must be appreciated and renewed again and again by each one of us. Persons and whole societies both can grow or wane in it. As we grow in it, we become more human and civilized.

Moral experience often spreads slowly, starting with those closest to us. Historically it would seem that moral awareness has been limited by egoistic concerns and by what we might call “moral tribalism” (a collective egoism). In an essay entitled “The Problem of Universal Values,” anthropologist Ralph Linton writes: “At the primitive level the individual’s tribe represents for him the limits of humanity and the same individual who will exert himself to any lengths in behalf of a fellow tribesman may regard the non-tribesman as fair game to be exploited
by any possible means, or even as a legitimate source of meat....” Economically, it might be said that non-tribesmembers are still being eaten. Our cannibalism is indirect now, operating through such things as “the terms of trade” and the widening structured gaps between rich and poor. The value of persons and their environment has historically meant the value of only some persons and some places. Racism, industrial pollution, anti-Semitism, slavery, nuclear waste, organized crime, the subjugation of women, terrorism, chauvinistic nationalism (a form of modern tribalism), apartheid, illegal trafficking in drugs, disregard of worker safety and of eco-systems, and the like, all witness to the primitive state of the moral process. The fact that we can live in our own comfort in a world where over forty thousand poor children die daily from malnutrition and lack of medicine signals that our FME is not at a high level of processual development.

The signs of limited moral sensitivity are also visible in our response to physical nature. Not much has changed since the time of Jeremiah the prophet. Although the reasons for his lament are different, the effects are the same: “How long must the country lie parched / and its green grass wither? / No birds and beasts are left, because its people are so wicked....” The foundational moral experience is not limited to persons but reaches into the material context from which we evolved and to which we are kith and kin. Like relatives who became rich, we have trampled on our familial earth-roots with little sign of reverence or affection. The moral process is only at its beginnings. This is portentous in that we are more technologically smart than morally wise.

The news is not all bad. The process is not going in full reverse. We see growth signs in the foundational moral process. We have begun to notice the need for handicapped persons to make phone calls from wheel chairs and to go to public rest rooms. However belated, that is progress. Slowly we are noticing our debts to the environment. Conservationists used to be considered idiosyncratic. The first “Earth Day” was looked on as a kind of “hippy” feast, but the idea was soon institutionalized into the Environmental Protection Agency. The “good old days” were not so good at all, as we now know. Progressive ideas like Social Security were resisted first as socialistic but were eventually seen as a minimal expression of civility. Gradually, the moral light is dawning that not all citizens have access to reasonable health care; plans are slowly aborning to correct that. Progress in the FME is possible and ongoing.

The foundational moral experience is rooted in affectivity and faith, and is subject to the ebbs and flows of a still young and precarious process. The object of this experience is the value of persons and their environment. This foundational experience includes an awareness of the value of others (all others) and of the connection between one’s
own value and that of others; it is short-circuited if one of these elements is lacking. We cannot just value self or just value others and be integral. We must see their link.

Ultimately, the capacity for love, the ability to appreciate and respond to the value of personal life in all its forms, is the foundation of moral consciousness. The appearance of moral awareness and of the capacity for love in the evolution of the human species was an event more significant for human existence than the first appearances of technology and art, even though these latter events are more easily chronicled and more easily win attention. That we as a human species have always attempted to distinguish between good and evil points to the discovery of the value of human life, of all life. This discovery leads to the concern for what befits it (moral good) and what does not befit it (moral evil). The encounter with moral worth in one’s self and in others engenders an affective faith response of reverence and wonder and yields the moral process to react to this life and its terrestrial setting in a fitting way. With this affirmation does consciousness enter the moral realm.