

THE COMPASSIONATE AMORALIST

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Review of Jonathan Glover,
Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century
(Yale University Press)

First Things 114 (June/July 2001), pp. 58-61

Jonathan Glover is stirred and troubled by the atrocities of the twentieth century, and wants to know why ordinary people can commit such terrible deeds and how to prevent them. The volume that he gives us is clear, interesting, full of agonized tenderness -- and deep in a suffocating darkness. "I have been thinking about this book for most of my adult life," he writes. "Since I first heard about the Nazi genocide, I have wondered how people could bring themselves to commit such acts." But he doesn't so much explain the phenomenon as exhibit it, and the chief exhibition is himself.

This must seem an extraordinary claim, and I will justify it. But first let me explain what the author is trying to do. At the start of the twentieth century, he writes, most people believed in two things: The first was the moral law, written, as Lord Acton said, on the "tablets of eternity," and self-evidently to be obeyed. The second was moral progress: A conviction that "human viciousness and barbarism [are] in retreat." After a century of wickedness beyond fathom, a hundred years in which the tears of tortured millions outflooded seas, he thinks that sensitive and reflective people can no longer believe such things. There is no moral law; there is no moral progress. The question for post-twentieth century man is whether, in a twilight beyond good and evil, we can be good; whether, bereft of the moral law, we can achieve a higher morality than hitherto.

It is a strange question. Glover is surely right that after witnessing the evils of the age, only a simpleton could believe that we are making progress. But why does he think the moral law itself discredited? His argument requires it; we depend on the law to recognize transgressions. To say "If there are atrocities, then there is no moral law" is like saying "If there are reckless drivers, then there is no difference between recklessness and taking care."

But it turns out that Glover does not mean exactly the moral law. What he means is what he calls "external" moral law -- a law which is given by God. God is the problem, because a wise God would not have ordained a world "in which people are hanged after spending their last night nailed by the ear to a fence, or in which babies are cut out of their mothers' wombs with daggers." A wise God, he thinks, would have *made* man good, or at least made him grow better over time. Glover sides therefore not with God but with Nietzsche, who proclaimed God dead and declared that we must be creators of our own morality. It does not interest him whether God judges the sins of men; because of the sins of men, he judges God.

The fact that Glover objects only to "external" morality solves some puzzles about his project, but not others. In the first place, it would seem that the whole meaning of morality is a rule that we ought to obey whether we like it or not. If so, then the idea of creating a morality we like better is incoherent. Moreover, it would seem that until we *had* created our new morality, we would have no standard by which to criticize God. Since we have not yet created one, the standard by which we judge Him must be the very standard that He gave us. If it is good enough to judge Him by -- if it is the whole ground of our complaint -- then why do we need a new one?

Although the author does not discuss these puzzles, he does discuss another one. Nietzsche was perceptive enough to realize that anyone who tries to create his own morality will be impeded in two ways: By the riot of impulses within him, each desiring to be master, and by the riot of men around him, each desiring to prevent *him* from being master. To succeed, he would have to be "hard," first to himself, then to those others. They would have to be "suppressed and reduced to imperfect men, to slaves and instruments," or his effort of creation would be stillborn. This is why Nietzsche wrote, "the great majority of men have no right to existence, but are a misfortune to higher men. I do not yet grant the failures the right. There are also peoples that are failures." Granted his mad starting point, his conclusions are perfectly logical. How such a philosophy can provide bulwarks *against* the abominations of the twentieth century is difficult to explain. The Nazis, after all, found it just the thing.

Glover admits all of this, but insists that "The Nietzschean nightmare does not follow from Nietzschean premises." He explains that "Nietzsche's self-creation pushes aside people who get in the way, but self-creation can be seen as one value among others My caring about the sort of person I am motivates the project of self-creation. Why should not my caring about other people set limits to

it?"

One good answer to the question is that it misses Nietzsche's point. It is in the nature, not only of the authentic morality, but of the new "moralities," to make claims on people. Sometimes the demands of different moralities come into conflict, and when this happens, either one must give way to the other, or both must give way to a third. If a creative and provident God has already impressed His law upon creation, then one can afford to do the right thing without regard for consequences: "For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then from my flesh I shall see God." But if one is trying to impress one's own law upon the world, then one must either break down all resistance, or fail. To put the paradox another way, a law of compassionate restraint is coherent only if it is *not* my own creation; any law that *is* my own creation must be merciless.

Glover, who disagrees, maintains that the project of creating a compassionate new morality will be aided by self-interest, personal identity, and "the human responses." Self-interest fits in because "it is often in our own interest to behave well to other people" and "society usually works to reinforce this." Personal identity is "the way we care about being one sort of person rather than another I may want to be more confident; I am not the sort of person who takes bribes; I am someone people can talk to; I would not have a haircut like that; I am quite a good parent some of the time; I am glad I am not a television evangelist." Among "the human responses," he calls particular attention to the tendency to respond to people with sympathy and the tendency to respond to them with respect.

None of the three inspires confidence. As to the first, Glover admits that sometimes it is *not* in our interest to behave well to other people, and sometimes the social pressures in favor of doing so are even reversed. As to the second, if "I am not the sort of person who tortures others" has no firmer foundation than "I would not have a haircut like that," we are in trouble; decent self-images draw strength *from* the moral law, yet the author wants to depend on them *instead of* moral law. As to "the human responses," even Glover recognizes two enormous problems. One is that they can be suppressed; the tyrants of our century learned to neutralize them through policies of emotional distance and deliberate humiliation. It is difficult to respect people whom you are driving naked, breasts and buttocks flapping, from one end of camp to another, and after you have done so they may seem more like cattle to you than like human beings; by mistreating them in certain ways, you have become more able to mistreat them in yet others. The other problem is that the

impulses to sympathy and respect have powerful competitors. For as Glover's own sources tell him, destruction can be loveable, mass murder can be a door to ecstasy, and for some men, communal killing is "the closest thing to what childbirth is for women: the initiation into the power of life and death."

Dare we admit that the problem is greater still? In Glover's post-Nietzschean world can be no reason to prefer the pangs of sympathy to the ecstasies of destruction *but that you do*. If you don't, there is nothing more to be said. The moral law can tell you which passions to prefer; the passions cannot. To choose, you need a standard which is not a passion. Moreover, as the passions cannot adjudicate themselves, neither can they understand themselves. Only in the light of morality can they recognize their own significance. For what are they *for*? With whom are we to sympathize, to whom shall we pay respect? Shall we "respond" to Franz Stangl, miserable in his confinement at Düsseldorf? Or to the Jews over whose deaths he reigned at Treblinka? Some people find this a difficult question. Some find it easy, but answer "Stangl."

And so we should not be surprised to find that in the end, the quality of Glover's mercy is strained. Why this has not been more widely noticed, I do not know. The book has been wreathed in golden praises, but as Lenin could have explained, every new march of cruelty receives such help. To see the problem we must put Glover's new book in the context of those which preceded it, especially *Causing Death and Saving Lives* (1977) and *Ethics of New Reproductive Technologies* (1989). He says that the relevance of his previous books to the project of building more secure defenses against any revival of Nazi policies is "obvious," and so it is, but not in the way he means. As found in those previous books, here are the facts.

Glover denies that human beings have any "right" to life at all. Personhood, he thinks, is a matter of degree; some humans have more of it than others do. According to him, even some of those who do rate as persons have lives not worth living. One recalls the phrase of the early German euthanasia promoters, *lebensunwerten Leben* -- "life unworthy of life" -- but Glover goes yet further. Even the principle "it is wrong to destroy a life which is worth living" is too strong for him, for he says one must consider other values, and "there is a tacit 'other things being equal' clause."

Occasionally, he says, it may even be right to kill someone who is not dying and who wants to go on living. He does say that only a monster of self-confidence would feel no qualms about such an act, but he does not say that only a monster of

self-confidence would commit it. For people who do feel squeamish, he has advice: If you are going to kill, then use means which have another desirable effect as well. For example, you might deliberately administer an excessive dose of painkiller. This "has the advantage of perhaps being less distressing to the person who has to carry it out" -- and it has a "blurring quality which makes prosecution less likely."

Abortion? Infanticide? Easier still. In Glover's view, neither is "directly" or intrinsically wrong. Abortion should be permitted at any stage, for any reason -- even a late abortion for sex selection, or because the mother's pregnancy "will prevent a holiday abroad." After all, he says, unborn babies are "replaceable." So, for that matter, are born ones: "if the mother will have other children instead, it is not directly wrong to prevent *this* foetus or baby from surviving." You can always have a better one later. Infanticide is a slightly different case, but only because killing born babies has stronger effects on third parties than killing unborn babies does. For example, it upsets people more, and it is more likely to set the culture on a slippery slope (as though we weren't on one already). Although Glover considers the side effects of abortion too slight to justify *any* limits, he concedes that the side effects of infanticide may be great enough to justify *some* limits.

What limits on infanticide does he have in mind? He says he doesn't know. Of course they should be worked out "with great explicitness and detail"; very comforting. They will also have to be worked out by those "in a better position to do so." Presumably our controllers would have to experiment not only with different policies about such deeds, but with different ways of reducing their side effects. The lighter they were, the more infanticides could be allowed. Though the author offers no suggestions here, he does offer suggestions for reducing the side effects of abortions. For example, if performing them makes abortionists and their helpers feel distress, then we could regard these people as "especially heroic, doing something intrinsically distasteful which yet prevents much unhappiness." That would make them feel better. Perhaps something like this could also be arranged for the people who work in infanticide centers.

What are we to make of all of this? Jonathan Glover thinks God-given moral law is done for. His own view is that by replacing traditional principles like the sanctity of human life with a morality "less likely to be eroded," his work builds barriers *against* contempt for life. It is hard to see how this could be, especially because his books of ethics employ the same technique of emotional distancing as the torturers that he studies: incomplete persons, replaceable babies, and all the rest. It is equally hard to see why he should object to a world "in which babies are

cut out of their mothers' wombs with daggers," but not to one in which mothers invite daggers into their wombs that their babies may be cut out. Psychologists speak of a "Stockholm Syndrome," in which victims come to identify with their persecutors. Perhaps there is a parallel syndrome, in which scholars of atrocity adopt some of the patterns of thinking of their subjects.

But I think a better answer to the riddle of work like this is found in the quotation with which the author begins his concluding chapter; though he quotes to disagree, it stands in quiet witness against his rebellion. "If you have no God then your moral code is that of society. If society is turned upside down, so is your moral code." The words are from a woman who endured the Chinese revolution. They apply as well to godless scholars as to godless party members.