

# DEPTH, TRUTH AND MORALITY

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When we teach philosophy to our students, we introduce Plato as one of the world's deepest thinkers. Then we reach Aristotle and we use the same adjective to describe Plato's great rival and as we come to other great philosophers in turn, Spinoza and Kant, Hegel and Kierkegaard, among others, we continue to attribute to each of them the quality of depth. This wide and generous use of the modifier 'deep' raises a puzzling question on the relation between depth and truth, namely: Is a deep view necessarily also a true one? Is depth necessarily concomitant with truth? If it is, then many of our evaluations of the great philosophers would appear to be false for if Plato was right then Aristotle had to be seriously mistaken,<sup>1</sup> and if either of them was right, then the Kantian view has to be false. If, however, a deep view can be a false view, we might wonder why it is deserving of the modifier 'deep', which usually carries such positive connotations. I shall refer to this problem as 'the true-deep paradox' (I am of course using the term 'paradox' in a wide and loose manner).

Another apparent paradox emerges when we look at the use of the term 'deep' as a property of persons. Novels and movies are often criticized because their characters are not deep enough, but rather 'shallow' and 'flat'. Yet the contrast between 'deep' and 'flat' does not correspond to that which obtains between moral and immoral. Deep characters are thought to be more complex, more dynamic and thus less pre-

dictable. While flat characters tend to represent stereotypes and rather superfluous attitudes, deep characters show innovative thinking, they reject generally-accepted values and norms and strive toward unexpected goals. In this sense, there is at least a tension between depth and morality, if not a real opposition. I shall refer to this problem as 'the moral-deep paradox'.

In this paper, I seek to shed some light on these problems concerning the notion of depth, problems which have been rather neglected in the philosophical literature.<sup>2</sup> I shall discuss the true-deep paradox in section I, and the moral-deep paradox in section II.

## I

When we point to the depth of philosophers, we primarily refer to the depth of their philosophical work, and only secondarily to the depth of the philosopher as a person. That is to say, we regard X as a deep philosopher insofar as we regard his or her work as philosophically deep. In this context the notion of depth at play is *depth as a property of a world-view, an insight, or an understanding*. This notion of depth is often used in literary criticism with regard to novels, movies, and the like. We say that some writers or directors are deep in their work because we feel that they manage to make some deep observation about the world. The difference between depth as a property of a philosophical work and depth as a property of an artistic work, seems to be that in the arts, the insights under discussion are typically (though not necessarily) focussed on some essential (and supposedly 'deep') aspects of the *human* condition, while in philosophy the foci are (again, typically) more general and concern more fundamental questions about existence, knowledge and truth.<sup>3</sup>

Saying that depth is used as a property of views and insights does not, of course, tell us much about the kind of

property it is, but merely sets the scene for discussion of the true-deep paradox, namely: For any given view, is its being true a necessary condition for its being deep?

A positive answer to this question is problematic for at least three reasons. First, as I indicated earlier, if depth is truth-dependent, then many great works in philosophy and in literature cannot be deep, simply because they are incompatible with other great works in the same areas. Yet we find it hard to renounce the depth of Plato, for instance, even after being convinced that Aristotle is right, or of the Bible, even after being convinced that there is no God. Second, if depth is contingent on truth then we cannot judge a movie as deep prior to settling questions regarding the truth of its assumptions. But in many cases, our recognition that a movie, a novel, or a philosophical work is deep seems to be more immediate and is usually made without awaiting a final verdict on the truth or falsity of the work. Thus, epistemologically speaking, the notion of depth seems to be prior to that of truth.

Third, there is an important difference between the notion of truth and that of depth with respect to the possibility of degree. Truth is an either-or matter; a proposition is either true or false. Hence, as far as truth is concerned, all false views are, so to say, false *to the same extent*. Thus, if non-true is necessarily non-deep, then we are led to the conclusion that all non-true views are non-deep to the same extent. Yet we have a strong intuition that this is not the case, that within the group of false ideas there is an important difference between ideas which are simply and uninterestingly false, and ideas which are interesting, and indeed deep, in spite of their falsity. The truth-dependent view of depth thus prevents us from making helpful distinctions between different sorts of false ideas.

These considerations seem to lead to the conclusion that depth is truth-neutral, a position recently stated by John Kekes.<sup>4</sup> According to Kekes, a person might be very deep although his or her understanding of reality is totally miscon-

ceived. Kant, for instance, 'was wrong on just all the central issues he discussed,' but nevertheless nobody would deny him a place among the handful of the deepest philosophers (Kekes, p. 440). In short, 'someone may possess great depth on some subject and yet be mistaken about it' (*ibid*). However, it is hard to accept that a view which is totally mistaken would nevertheless be considered deep. This difficulty stems from the positive connotation of the term 'deep'. To say that some work is deep is to recommend it in some sense, at least to recommend its study. But why should we make an effort to study a philosophical treatise which is mistaken in its most central points?

In fact, Kekes himself seems to be inconsistent in applying his truth-neutral model to his account of what it would mean to have a deep understanding of the human condition. I shall digress for a while to explain this point which has implications for understanding the relation of depth to morality as well, and then come back to my main line of argument.

In analyzing depth, contends Kekes, special importance should be given to understanding. Depth does not relate to trivial matters, but to those of ultimate importance; 'Depth involves discerning an underlying unity among apparently complex and unrelated phenomena' (Kekes, p. 440). In moral depth, the object of the understanding is its significance for human beings. In this sense, it is anthropocentric (p. 445). It is important 'because it involves understanding of the human aspiration to live good lives' (*ibid*). More particularly, moral depth 'concerns some conditions of life whose prevalence is hidden from no one. These conditions are not discovered by those who possess moral depth; rather, they come to appreciate what these well-known conditions mean for the human aspiration to live good lives' (p. 446). What are these 'well-known conditions'? According to Kekes, they refer to the contingency and vulnerability of human life in general and of our own lives in particular.<sup>5</sup> Thus deep persons are those who understand the true significance of this contingency, form the

appropriate emotive responses to it, and behave accordingly. This understanding does not steer the deep persons into despair, nor lead them to indifference. On the contrary, as with the Stoics, it makes them stronger and more immune to the calamities and misfortunes of the world.

Yet this definition of (moral) depth in terms of what Kekes regards as 'the general conditions of life' (i.e. the contingency of human existence and [what Kekes sees as] its significance), is clearly incompatible with the truth-neutral model of depth.<sup>6</sup> To illustrate this criticism, let me present a different possible view of these conditions which leads to a different, though a no less plausible example of moral depth.

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James describes (among other things) the experiences of mystics in various cultures and religions. A very common element in these experiences is the acknowledgment of (what the mystic sees as) an underlying unity behind the plurality of phenomena in the world and its ultimate significance for human lives. Consider, for example, the following quotation cited by James from Dr. Bucke, a Canadian psychiatrist:

I had spent the evening in a great city, with two friends, reading and discussing poetry and philosophy... My mind...was calm and peaceful.. All at once, without warning of any kind I found myself wrapped in a flame-coloured cloud... Directly afterward there came upon me a sense of exultation, of immense joyousness accompanied or immediately followed by an intellectual illumination impossible to describe. Among other things, I did not merely come to believe, but I saw that the universe is not composed of dead matter, but is, on the contrary, a living Presence; I became conscious in myself of eternal life... I saw that all men are mortal...that the foundation principle of the world, of all the worlds, is what we call love, and that the happiness of each and all is in the long run absolutely certain... That view, that conviction, I may say that consciousness, has never, even during periods of the deepest depression, been lost.<sup>7</sup>

For Bucke, as for many other mystics in Western tradition, the underlying unity of reality is explained by the omnipresence of God. Appearances are illusory and misleading because they incite the thought that there exists a plurality of isolated phenomena which are governed by contingency and often express cosmic injustice and even chaos. The deep insight of the mystic reveals the superficiality of this impression; for him or her the world is really an harmonious unity and nothing within it is accidental or unjustified.

Thus Kekes's first condition for depth is no doubt fulfilled in Bucke's case, i.e., 'discerning an underlying unity among apparently complex and unrelated phenomena' (p. 440). Also, this understanding of reality is not merely theoretical, but has serious implications for one's emotions, aspirations and behaviour. It thus has the 'anthropocentric' nature typical of moral depth. To be sure, the mystics might be totally mistaken about the real conditions of human existence. But if we take seriously the separation between depth and truth, their mistake should not deny them the title of depth, as long as they fulfil the structural conditions for it.

'The subject-matter of *moral* depth,' argues Kekes, 'is the enduring question of how to live a good life,' which is a combination of personal satisfaction and moral merit. Both these elements are taken by believers to be explained by a religious outlook. The sense of standing before the Lord is supposed to be most satisfying and rewarding, and His moral perfection is supposed to induce moral imitation within believers. The essential moral element in most religions<sup>8</sup> guarantees that the theoretical understanding of religion is tightly connected with moral merit. To conclude, my point is not that the mystic, or the religious view of reality and of morality is preferable to the view offered by Kekes in Sections II-III of his article, but rather that it is just as good a candidate for moral depth. Given his assumption that depth is truth-neutral, Kekes unnecessarily limits the possibilities for moral depth. While moral depth can

indeed be expressed in apprehending (what the subject sees as) the ultimate *contingency* of reality and its significance for human life, it can equally be manifested in understanding (what the subject sees as) the ultimate *necessity* and justice of the conditions of life.<sup>9</sup>

Back to our main track. What we need in order to escape the true-deep paradox is a middle ground position, a position that will have depth depend on *some* notion of truth—without thereby implying that truth in the strict sense is a necessary condition for the depth of a philosophical or a literary work. A good starting point for finding such a position would be to notice that even if truth were a necessary condition for depth, it would surely not be a sufficient one; many views in a variety of fields are true though nobody would say that they are therefore deep. What, then, would be required to make a view also *deep*?

What would be required, I believe, is the explication of connections between things that on the face of them seem separate and distinct. I use ‘things’ as a very general term, to include facts, ideas, questions, fields of inquiry. A view is deep in this sense when it helps us notice, for example, how some metaphysical assumptions are related to epistemological and moral issues and how different interpretations of these assumptions signify different routes to follow in other areas. One variant of such a connection between seemingly detached phenomena is a presumed *unity* between them, which is the way Kekes spells out this idea: ‘Depth involves discerning an underlying unity among apparently complex and unrelated phenomena’ (Kekes, p. 440). We should not, however, interpret this unity as necessarily presupposing a reductionist view like the mystical approach I mentioned earlier. The notion of unity I have in mind is a much looser one which covers various types of connection between phenomena, ideas, and questions.

Note that a kind of unity is also a result of some scientific theories when they argue, for instance, that all material bodies, which on the face of it seem so different, are really mani-

festations of the same elements. Yet we rarely use ‘deep’ to describe such theories, probably because the scope of unity and connectedness is rather limited and does not relate to metaphysical, epistemological, moral and other issues to which a deep philosophical work typically relates.

Plato’s theory of Forms might have been wrong in various ways but was nevertheless deep in the sense of clarifying the connection between some basic philosophical questions and exploring the wide implications of one sort of answer to these questions. These connections and implications can be true even if the general theory put forward is, in the final analysis, incoherent, and they must be at least partially true for the theory to be deep. A deep philosophical work is supposed to take us on a detailed tour of some attractive route, showing us the various intersections with other paths, stopping at points where we can look at the view, and convincing—or almost convincing—us that this is the right route to travel. Even if at the end we do not reach our destination we will still have learnt quite a lot, we will have widened our horizons and will have reached a richer understanding of the possibilities that confront us. In the context of a philosophical work, not reaching the destination would mean not arriving at a true theory of the subject matter under discussion, though trying to say what exactly ‘a true theory’ means here lies beyond the scope of the present study.

Regarding the relation between depth and truth, then, I would like to argue that though the particular route taken by philosophical work might be wrong (I shall accept the broadest interpretation of this adjective), the map of connections and implications that it draws is to a large extent true. The image of a map enables us to say that this truth concerns issues of *structure* more than issues of *content*. As structure is a formal property, it can play the role of the middle-ground position we were looking for: On the one hand, there is a sense in which one can get the structure of some entity right or wrong,

hence depth is not entirely truth-neutral. On the other hand, as different views can share the recognition of similar structures, depth is not entirely truth-dependent either.

There is, however, a different sense of depth, one which is often used when evaluating literature and poetry. A deep novel is assumed to catch the 'depth' of the human condition, the word 'depth' being used here to express the sense of capturing the complexity of human nature. A deep movie seeks to show the complexity of motives, the instability of character and the unpredictability which is typical to human beings. Here depth does not consist in revealing some sort of a unity but to the contrary, in revealing the essential plurality, complexity and conflict within human nature. Within this sense of depth, too, depth is not entirely truth-neutral, because the complexity itself is assumed to hold true. Nor is it truth-dependent in any strong case, because this complexity can be presented in many different and conflicting ways and, moreover, is often not susceptible to pure 'argument'. Thus depth as complexity can also serve as the required middle-ground.

Recognizing these two notions of depth helps us to understand some disagreements about depth. Suppose somebody argues that, fundamentally, there is only one force that motivates human beings, which is sexual desire, and hence, sexual desire is the key to explain all aspects of human behaviour. Some will argue that such a view is very deep; it reveals a unity behind the seemingly plurality of human behaviours. Others will argue that, to the contrary, the view is rather shallow; while sexual desire is no doubt an essential element, reducing all aspects of human behaviour to it would be simplistic and superficial.

## II

What is now the relation between depth and morality? What would it mean to have 'moral depth'?

One natural way of interpreting this expression would rely on the general account of depth offered above. That is to say, moral depth would be depth in the same sense articulated above—insofar as it is relevant to morality. And ‘relevant’ means that the object of the philosophical or literary insight is the human condition, or that this insight has important implications for the understanding of this condition. The two meanings of depth analyzed earlier entail two different meanings of moral depth, as follows:

First, corresponding to the meaning of depth as referring to connectedness and unity, moral depth would mean an understanding of the ‘deep’ connection that exists between different human phenomena (i.e. between one phenomenon and other phenomena and between these phenomena as a whole and other, natural or metaphysical phenomena). Due to the positive connotation of the term ‘depth,’ this understanding is typically related to positive results in the moral domain. Thus, for example, one might say that Derek Parfit’s views on personal identity expressed in *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford, 1984) are morally deep because of the results they have on understanding the (un)separateness of human beings. By contrast, we would be reluctant to apply ‘moral depth’ to some strict version of psychological hedonism that sought to reduce all human behaviour to the satisfaction of one kind of desire (sex, power, or whatever). Though in some sense this view might be a deep one, it would usually be thought of as morally destructive, not deep.

Second, corresponding to the meaning of depth as referring to plurality and complexity, moral depth would mean understanding the complexity and plurality of motives, desires, attitudes and views which characterize human beings and which resist any attempt at reduction. In this sense, the view of Isaiah Berlin and his followers on the plurality of values is morally deep as it points to the multi-faceted nature of human beings and to the requirement to account for this fact in our

moral and political reasoning. Similarly with many novels and movies, which are morally deep in the sense of helping us see the moral price which is entailed in hard choices, and the ineliminable conflict among our desires, values and loyalties.

As I indicated in section I, these two senses of moral depth might collide. Think, for instance, of utilitarianism. In the first sense of depth, this theory might be regarded as morally deep, as it reveals the unifying factor underlying seemingly unrelated moral notions and aspirations, namely, the pursuit of maximum general happiness. On the second sense of depth, however, utilitarianism might be regarded as a rather shallow view, which fails to notice the richness and the 'depth' of human motives, needs and goals.

In both of these senses of depth, however, moral depth has to do with *understanding*. A morally deep person is one who has a deep understanding of the moral realm, an understanding which is typically related to central justificatory claims about a certain moral outlook.

Is there any substantial connection between this understanding and moral character and behaviour? I doubt it. Unfortunately, a deep understanding of the moral domain is neither necessary nor sufficient for good character or proper behaviour. A different view seems to be held by Kekes, who seeks to make a link between recognizing the contingency of reality (which he identifies as moral depth) and moral merit. Kekes argues that reasonable people who acknowledge the contingencies of reality will aim at a system of human justice, in spite of its many defects and limitations, 'because they realize the intolerability of any alternative' (Kekes, p. 452). However, I find this link loose and rather artificial. While any alternative to human justice might be intolerable for humanity in general, or for future generations, that such an alternative is similarly intolerable for the individual is far from clear. It seems to be no less reasonable to adopt a different response to the contingencies of life, of the sort echoed in the words of

## Ecclesiastes:

There is a vanity which is done upon the earth; that there are just men, unto whom it happeneth according to the work of the wicked; again, there are wicked men, to whom it happeneth according to the work of the righteous: I said that this also is vanity. Then I commanded mirth, because a man hath no better thing under the sun than to eat and to drink and to be merry... Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of the life of thy vanity, which he hath given thee under the sun for that is thy portion of this life...(8:14-15, 9:9).

Thus, the belief in the vulnerability of human life, in the fact that 'time and chance happeneth to them all' (11:11), can reasonably lead one to a sort of rational despair from morality, and to a concentration on one's own satisfactions and pleasures; merriment, food and erotic love.<sup>10</sup>

Depth as understanding is thus only loosely connected to character and action. To get a stronger link, we need to look at a different notion of depth, namely *depth as a property of character*. Yet this notion gave rise to what I called the moral-deep paradox; deep people are not necessarily moral people: and worse, and they might even be less moral than 'flat' people. The combination of 'moral' and 'deep' seems, therefore, to be problematic. Once more, the paradox dissolves when we notice that there are two different senses of depth as a property of character, which rather surprisingly correspond to the two senses of depth as a sort of understanding. The first is depth as unity, or better, as *integrity*. We use 'moral depth' to indicate the presence of a moral character. Shallow people are only superficially moral, their emotive reactions and moral behaviour are in a sense external, accidental and unstable, because they do not stem from well-established moral dispositions. By contrast, with deep people, there exists a firm commitment to morally valuable objectives. Such a commitment is an essential part of the notion of moral integrity as Mark Halfon has argued at length.<sup>11</sup> This commitment has a unify-

ing and an integrating role, hence the relation between depth, unity, and integrity. The other sense of depth as a property of character is depth as multifacedness. Thus viewed, deep people are regarded as typically *not* oriented to one commitment, but rather as having various commitments which reflect a plurality of motives and desires.

One can easily see now that the moral-deep paradox arises only for the latter notion of depth, and not for the notion of depth as integrity. It should also be clear how, once again, these two notions of depth can conflict, for instance, around the issue of moral saints. If depth means an underlying unity, then moral saints are praiseworthy for their depth, for their ability to integrate their forces to achieve their moral goals. If, by contrast, depth means variety and complexity, then moral saints would be less attractive, as indeed is argued by Susan Wolf.<sup>12</sup> According to Wolf, moral saints lack many characteristics which make for a 'richly developed character,'<sup>13</sup> and they are so boring, flat and dull that we can thank God that neither us nor our children are among them.<sup>14</sup> Thus, while Gandhi is mentioned by Halfon as a paradigmatic—and admirable—example of integrity,<sup>15</sup> he is mentioned (indirectly) by Wolf as an example of a saint whom many people genuinely and justifiably do not wish to be like.<sup>16</sup>

### III

It is time to sum up the conclusions of the discussion. One point that emerges out of it is that 'depth' is a rather deep notion, i.e. it has more meanings than one might think at first sight. The first distinction which needs to be made is that between depth as an underlying unity, or connectedness, and depth as a complexity. These two different notions are in opposition to each other, which helps to explain many disagreements on questions of depth, in various domains; pointing to some underlying unity might be seen by some people as

a deep insight, while others will regard it as flat precisely because it plays down the complexity and variety of the phenomenon under discussion.

The second distinction that needs to be borne in mind is that between depth as a property of an insight, or a view (which often refers directly or indirectly to the moral sphere), and depth as a property of character. When we combine these two distinctions we get four main notions of depth:

- 1 A view that understands the 'deep' connections between seemingly separate phenomena/questions/ideas.
- 2 A view that understand the 'depths,' i.e. the complexities in what seems at first sight transparent and simple.
- 3 A person whose forces are integrated and directed toward a unifying goal, i.e. a person of integrity who is 'deeply' committed to some important cause.
- 4 A person whose personality is 'deep,' i.e. embodies different and opposing desires, attitudes and commitments, thereby making the person rather unpredictable and 'interesting'.

Regarding the relation between depth and truth, I argued that depth is not entirely truth-neutral and that judgments about the depth of some understanding presuppose that this understanding got the picture at least partially right, where this typically relates to questions of structure. With depth as a property of persons, the assumption of truth is even clearer; saying that somebody is a deep person (in either senses of depth relevant here) is saying something which the speaker holds to be true about that person.

As for the relation between depth and morality (namely, moral character and behaviour), I argued that depth-as-understanding (notions 1-2 above) has only a limited effect, if at all, on morality, even when the understanding is (directly or indirectly) relevant to morality. Depth as a property of persons (notions 3-4 above), by contrast, lead to different and rather

conflicting pictures about the relation between depth and morality. While depth-as-integrity regards depth as part and parcel of a morally admirable person, depth-as-complexity stands in some tension with morality, a tension that gave rise to what I called the moral-deep paradox. This paradox, as well as the true-deep one, weakens when we notice the depth of the notion of depth, its different contexts and its internal tensions.<sup>17</sup>

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 Assuming, of course, that the Platonic and Aristotelian systems are not complementary systems, as many believed in the past.
- 2 An exception is John Kekes, 'Moral Depth,' *Philosophy* 65 (1990), pp. 439-453.
- 3 Though I think that much of what I say applies to the plastic arts too, I avoided referring explicitly to them for two reasons. First, there is a certain ambiguity in using 'depth' in the artistic domain as it refers not only to the depth of an insight and so forth, but also more technically to depth as perspective. Thus, when we speak of the 'depth' of some painting this often has nothing to do with the depth of its idea or theme. Second, under the influence of post-modernism, the term 'depth' is less commonly used nowadays to evaluate works of art or artists having been replaced by 'interesting'.
- 4 See *supra*, note 1.
- 5 The nature and the significance of these conditions for morality are at the centre of the recent debate on moral luck. See Daniel Statman (ed.), *Moral Luck*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1993.
- 6 That Kekes sees this understanding as true is clear. In p. 449, for example, referring to the contingency of life, he says explicitly, 'the possession of this *truth*...may just sap our will' (italics added).
- 7 R. M. Bucke, *Cosmic Consciousness: A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind*, Philadelphia 1901, p. 2. Quoted by James, *ibid.*, Penguin edition, 1982, p. 399.
- 8 See especially Ronald Green, *Religion and Moral Reason*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1988, and also Avi Sagi and

Daniel Statman, *Religion and Morality*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995.

- 9 Kekes refers to Martha Nussbaum's book on *The Fragility of Goodness* as a source emphasizing the contingency of human conditions (note 8). Nussbaum indeed expresses this view very clearly. Yet in her historical survey she describes how this view was acknowledged by Aristotle, and denied by Plato (in most of his writings). If Nussbaum's interpretation is correct would this mean that Plato was less deep than Aristotle?
- 10 It is worth noting that some religious philosophers have developed an argument for the existence of God on the basis of these considerations. As they think that seeing reality as contingent is an obstacle, rather than an encouraging factor for moral behaviour, they argue that God's existence must be postulated to make morality 'work'. See Robert Adams's discussion on 'Moral Arguments for Theistic Belief', especially section II, in his *The Virtue of Faith*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1987, Ch. 10.
- 11 Mark S. Halfon, *Integrity: A Philosophical Inquiry*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989, esp. Part 1.
- 12 Susan Wolf, 'Moral Saints,' *Journal of Philosophy* 79 (1982): 419-439.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 421.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 419.
- 15 Hanlon, *ibid.*, 13.
- 16 Wolf, 436, n. 4, who quotes in agreement George Orwell in his 'Reflections on Gandhi'.
- 17 For helpful comments on earlier versions I am greatly indebted to Andrew Brien, Sam Fleischacker, Yair Lorberbaum, Saul Smilansky and two anonymous readers for *Sophia*.