

CHAPTER ONE

THE VALUE IN A STORY

In 1797, near the end of the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant illustrated his views on the use of individual exemplars in the teaching of ethics:

a teacher will not tell his naughty pupil: take an example from that good (orderly, diligent) boy! For this would only cause him to hate that boy, who puts him in an unfavorable light. A good example (exemplary conduct) should not serve as a model but only as a proof that it is really possible to act in conformity with duty. So it is not comparison with any other human being whatsoever (as he is), but with the *idea* (of humanity), as he ought to be, and so comparison with the law, that must serve as the constant standard of the teacher's instruction.

He had made his point even more provocatively in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* of 1785:

Nor could one give worse advice to morality than by wanting to derive it from examples. For, every example of it represented to me must itself first be appraised in accordance with principles of morality, as to whether it is also worthy to serve as an original example, that is, as a model; it can by no means authoritatively provide the concept of morality. Even the Holy One of the Gospel must first be compared with our ideal of moral perfection before he is cognized as such. . . . Imitation has no place in matters of morality, and examples serve only for encouragement.¹

Here is an apparently irremovable obstacle of principle in the way of the project for this book. Biography, naturally, is possible, and may serve as “encouragement.” But taking lessons from individual cases is exactly the opposite of what we should do. A single life may illustrate or exemplify a virtue or value. A single choice may exemplify right or wrong. Any kind of judgment must generalize. Any narrative about an individual will be specific. In most interesting cases it will be so specific as to be unique. Oppenheimer himself touched on this in a letter of 1930 where he mentioned a question that had been raised by his brother: “In how far is it possible to formulate ethical rules from which the proper conduct in specific cases may be deduced?” He commented in reply that the question was “too hard to write about, and in my opinion of high importance.”² He took it no further in writing.

Two conflicting lines of thought need to be confronted. On the one hand, to say anything about actions, decisions, or character must be to describe them, and so to categorize or classify them in some way. From there, following Kant, in short, it seems that we are led toward generalized laws, rules, or principles. Thus, it might be thought more fitting to discuss the role of the scientist in a political context, rather than the complexities of one man’s life. Or, more strongly, unless there are worthwhile conclusions on issues such as the role of the scientist, there might seem to be no gain in going into specific detail. On the other hand, Oppenheimer offers a case in which any sort of generalization seems futile. What rule or principle could he exemplify? In a situation when you are asked to lead the research on the first atomic weapons. . . . In a war where your appalling enemy may be developing similar weapons. . . . Hardly common situations. The point comes out still more sharply by asking who “you” might be. Easy to end up asking what would or should be done by a person who could only be Oppenheimer at a time that could only be 1942: so, back to the particulars. Answers to questions about what to do and how to live must be both usefully general and relevantly particular, which seems impossible. Hence, problems not just here but with moral philosophizing more widely. Hence, too, no lessons from history.

This mirrors a tension between biography and philosophy. Even the most schematic or didactic version of a life story—a standard life of a saint, for example—is likely to contain more contingencies than a philosopher may want to handle. Any general conclusions from an individual life may run the risk of simplifying a tangled reality. Interestingly, and paradoxically, the best biographies that have been in-

tended more or less overtly as moral studies can also be the most cautious in pointing to overtly moralistic conclusions. Samuel Johnson's *Life of Mr. Richard Savage*, a saga of violent profligacy and folly, ends calmly: "Those are no proper Judges of his Conduct who have slumber'd away their Time on the Down of Abundance, nor will a wise Man easily presume to say, 'Had I been in *Savage's* Condition, I should have lived, or written, better than *Savage*.'" ³

Gitta Sereny's investigation of Franz Stangl, commandant at Treblinka, a catalogue of the most terrible misdeeds that could be imagined, ends with one short page of tentative thoughts about freedom and responsibility which are the author's frank preconceptions as much as deductions from her study. ⁴

These are not entirely matters of authorial reticence or reluctance to judge. Letting actions speak for themselves may be more persuasive than open praise or condemnation. And that is not just a question of rhetoric. "Had I been in *Savage's* Condition . . ." has a point, but only a limited one. Our imagination will only take us so far with *Savage*; maybe, as Johnson intended, to a point of sympathy, but not as far as to admit that we would ever be in *Savage's* condition. A reasonable response may be not just be "I would not get myself in that condition" but "Savage should never have put himself in that condition." Sereny's book on Stangl is a classic account of a weak, stupid man sliding from questionable to wholly outrageous work, fortified by an expected range of excuses. Her book is an excellent one partly because the breadth of its message is left open, unlikely to apply to many possible readers, but unfortunately almost as unlikely to apply only to Stangl himself.

It should go without saying that Oppenheimer, too, was, to say the least, an unusual man in an unusual situation between 1942 and 1945. His lawyer at the security hearings in 1954 played this up in his closing peroration:

You have in Dr. Oppenheimer an extraordinary individual, a very complicated man, a man that takes a great deal of knowing, a gifted man beyond what nature can ordinarily do more than once in a very great while. Like all gifted men, unique, sole, not conventional, not quite like anybody else that ever was or ever will be.

He went on, excusably begging a large question that needs a real answer:

... Does this mean that you should apply different standards to him than you would to somebody like me or somebody else that is just ordinary? No, I say not. I say that there must not be favoritism in this business. You must hew to the line and do your duty without favor, without discrimination, if you want to use those words.⁵

This may have been sensible advocacy, but its logic is not obvious. Why should an exceptional man in a unique situation be judged by the same standards as anyone else? Leaving aside any obvious political (or religious) bias toward equality, surely everything points in the opposite direction?

Two questions will help to clear this ground. First: how can moral reflection be kept particular? (That is: how or where should it not be generalized?) Second: how or where can the general be usefully applied to the particular in moral reflection? Both questions must be faced in dealing with the contingencies of an individual life. They look similar, but go in differing directions, and not symmetrically. In looser terms: how can biography connect with moral philosophy? And: how can moral philosophy apply to biography?



The first question is, again, rooted in the challenge from Kant. Even a “unique” person (e.g., a saint or a monster) is a case of something (saintliness or monstrosity). When Kant wrote (in the second opening quotation to this chapter) “Imitation has no place in matters of morality” he could have had at least two thoughts in mind. Whenever you say “act like that” with an individual exemplar, it is always the “like that,” not the individuality, that matters. The exemplar will, by its nature, have to be a case of something not particular (even a case of “unparalleled wickedness”). Then—it seems to follow—some general rule will always be assumed or implied. Morality becomes possible exactly because any particular judgments are of course judgments and judgments have to include general concepts that are interconnected in ways not of our individual choosing. This is a strand in the “transition from popular moral philosophy to metaphysics of morals” that forms the second part of the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Kant thought it clear that “all moral concepts have their seat and origin [*Sitz und Ursprung*] completely a priori in reason.”⁶

Suppose we want to debate a specific choice, such as Oppenheimer's acceptance of the leadership of research at Los Alamos. The questions—judgments—that might arise would include: Was this a good or a right choice? Was it a free choice? What were the alternatives? Then, any imaginable level of debate will require generalities—"choice," "right"—and any level of debate that could be described as moral may require language or concepts that entail some view of morality: What factors were or should have been taken into account? Would they have been the same or different for anyone else relevantly placed in the same situation?

One possibility is to stop this line of thinking from the start, or rather turn it on its head. Iris Murdoch, for example, questioned the orthodox contrast between (on the one hand) concrete individuals knowable—hence judgeable—through abstract concepts (on the other). She was willing to regard at least some moral concepts as "concrete" and, more relevantly here, to regard knowledge of an individual as direct and primary. "It is just the historical, individual, nature of the virtues as actually exemplified which makes it difficult to learn goodness from another person."⁷ There is no need to get into any abstract, technical dispute (over knowledge by direct acquaintance against knowledge by description or reference against generality) to see her main idea: that our grasp of individuals and their actions may be firmer than our agreement on a language to describe them, or a set of concepts by which to judge them. This is more interestingly fundamental than Nietzsche's blunt refusal to go down Kant's path:

No one who judges, "in this case everybody would have to act like this" has yet taken five steps towards self-knowledge. For he would then know that there neither are nor can be actions that are all the same; that every act ever performed was done in an altogether unique and unrepeatable way.⁸

Of course it is true that no actions are the same: exactly as it is impossible to step in the same river twice. Nietzsche himself was robust about the consequences or corollaries. His view would make any legal judgments impossible, in line with his scorn for what he saw as the Kantian reduction of morality to law. But, taken literally, it would also make any use of descriptive language questionable. That might provide support or reinforcement for a view that there can be no description without interpretation. Whether or not all this is a fair version of Nietzsche's

position, it is far less defensible than the simpler view of Murdoch. We need no radical skepticism about description, morals, or anything else to feel at least as confident about an individual understanding as about the allegedly underlying logic or principles.

That is a less dogmatic a view than the casuist's assertion that moral knowledge is essentially particular;⁹ and it is not quite the point made many times in the long-running difference of opinion between Richard Hare and Thomas Nagel, and echoed in subsequent debates about "moral particularism."¹⁰ Hare wanted to insist that there can be no prelogical (or rather preconceptual) grasp of moral facts. In response, Nagel stressed that specific verdicts are possible without a known or explicit grounding in moral theory. Murdoch's thought is less reassuring than either of these extremes. We may know the individual (or hope we do) but remain uncertain about the concepts or categories through which our knowledge may become manipulable. The next chapter, for example, will ask where we want to apply appraisal to Oppenheimer: to a single choice? a series of choices? a life? a life in science? a personality? Even in picking one single act of choice—a decision to accept a job at Los Alamos—the implied framework of appraisal, consequences, and regret is so indeterminate that there can be no uncontroversial starting-point.

Stronger and clearer thoughts come out from Kant's step toward what he called the moral law. Kant wanted a "pure moral philosophy, completely cleansed of everything that may be only empirical and that belongs to anthropology." To qualify as moral, his laws had to be absolutely necessary and absolutely universal. They had to override absolutely all other considerations. Because of their universality and necessity they would apply not only for humans but for all rational beings. The form of the argument was typically Kantian, resting on the transcendental *unless*. Unless morality was lawlike—that is, universally and impartially binding—it could not exert the force (through duty) that Kant felt it had. Unless it came from a "pure" conceptual source, it could not be universally and impartially binding. The ground of obligation should not be sought "in the nature of the human being or in the circumstances of the world in which he is placed."¹¹

Such might be the heart of an objection to a link between biography and philosophy, refigured as a particular case and universal morality. Part of the trouble with it lies in Kant's hyperbole. The justification for his exaggeration of morality into what he called a "system"¹² was not at all self-evident. In the example that he drew

from Rousseau for the *Critique of Practical Reason*, someone was pressed, on pain of execution, “to give false testimony against an honorable man.” We are asked to recognize only the possibility of a distinction between a sense of duty and a “love of life, however great it may be.”¹³ Interestingly and relevantly, the example lacks details. To take some banal thoughts, it is not unimaginable that Kant’s exemplar might just not grasp *that much* of a sense of duty. Simply, he might not see (still less admire) even the possibility of sacrificing a life for a stranger or for some matter of principle. He might not be an immoralist or an amoralist—just someone whose life or family mattered more than someone else’s principles. There seems to be nothing inconsistent about either a limited sense of conscience or a limited understanding of conscience.

There are ways round this. The committed Kantian can go on arguing that only a more general moral rule (“put your family first”) can trump a moral rule, and so on. Kant’s Abraham should have said: “That I ought not to kill my good son is quite certain. But that you, this apparition, are God—of that I am not certain, and never can be, not even if this voice rings down to me from (visible) heaven.”¹⁴ There, moral law took priority over moral or religious intuition. (Kierkegaard drew diametrically opposite conclusions at great length from the same example in *Fear and Trembling*.)

A far greater problem arises from the nature of the move to “law” understood in terms of universality and necessity. The real difficulty is neither that the purity of morality is itself a value, in a question-begging way (as Bernard Williams suggested¹⁵), nor that a recourse to law is to wash out the morals in morality (as Nietzsche thought). To mistrust a reliance on an individual example because the moral law must be abstract—“pure”—and general is to abandon one form of narrative, which has its feet on the ground, in favor of another, which does not. Kant’s extensive use of legal and political metaphor was rooted in an evidently partial understanding of law. To experience a sense of duty, for example, is to understand compulsion (dramatized into necessitation) and some notion of fairness (dramatized into universality). His story was that “pure reason, *practical of itself*, is . . . immediately lawgiving. The will is thought as independent of empirical conditions and hence, as pure will, as determined by *the mere form of law*.” Or again: “Every concept of duty involves objective constraint through a law”—a thought followed by a torrent of legal imagery:

the internal *imputation* of a *deed*, as a case falling under a law, belongs to the *faculty of judgment*. . . . Upon it follows the conclusion of *reason* (the verdict), that is, the connecting of the rightful result with the action (condemnation or acquittal). All this takes place before a *tribunal*, which, as a moral person giving effect to the law, is called a *court*.—Consciousness of an *internal court* in the human being . . . is *conscience*.¹⁶

The appeal to legal metaphor was supposed to be to a set of concepts that would be intelligible and, presumably, acceptable to Kant's enlightened readers. Law was assumed to be fair and general in its nature. A fine thought from the end of the eighteenth century, but unfortunately not one to be taken for granted, and still less to bear so much theoretical weight. The medieval English legal dictum "the king shall be under God and the law" was not a description or analysis of a concept of law but, at least, a declaration of a wish to contain royal power. Its normativity came from baronial force, not logic. The vindication for Kant's elaborate imagery of debates in the tribunal of reason may be portrayed positively as "recursive" rather than circular, tied constructively to a central value of autonomy. Yet we can still ask why a tribunal or debate *has* to be conducted according to rules of Enlightenment impartiality. There may be a pragmatic answer. As Onora O'Neill puts it, "Debate cannot survive the adoption of principles destroying debate."¹⁷ But why should it survive in that way? Why should that matter?

This is all unpalatably abstract. There is a concrete link with the quotation from Oppenheimer's lawyer a few pages back. In the 1954 tribunal he asked, again: "Does this mean that you should apply different standards to him than you would to somebody like me or somebody else that is just ordinary?" And his own reply was: "No, I say not. I say that there must not be favoritism in this business." In what was, literally, a legal context, that may have been appropriate. There may have been "standards" against which it may have been necessary to appraise Oppenheimer's actions: Kant's "objective constraint." In an American legal context such standards could only be represented as impartial and impersonal. Was this not the only way in which Oppenheimer should be judged? One possible response might be to point to his uniqueness as a man and to the unrepeatability of the situations in which he was placed in the 1940s. His lawyer did try this, but only as a rhetorical gesture, no doubt mindful that Napoleonic

exceptionalism might not impress his audience. Another response might be to underline the difference between the actual practice of justice (in the McCarthyite fever of 1954) and ideal (or even acceptable) standards of judgment. That would be an appeal to morality or politics behind law, bringing out a difference between how the law should be and how it was in reality.

This specific case shows what is not helpful about a Kantian approach. If an individual is to be judged, it should be according to law-like principles. But whose law-like principles, and where? And why, for that matter, be so keen on judgment at all? For Kant, such questions would be absurd. The moral law must be absolute, for all rational beings. Crucially, the standards for the law can come from nothing but itself, not—particularly not—from human or divine endorsement. Kant might take the view that law would not be law if it were not like this. The world might be a better place if he were right. Unfortunately, there is no reason to take his view as anything but an enlightened recommendation.

Biography can bring something to philosophy because the value or sense in a story lies at least as plausibly in the individual story itself as in some more general narrative of principles and law. Which is to say that philosophical ambitions toward abstraction or generality must be treated with some care.



In another direction, though, what can the philosopher bring to a life story? Why not leave it to the biographer or historian? One reply might be that this kind of demarcation is pointless. Any distinctiveness might just as well be a matter of focus and emphasis. Philosophers have tried occasionally to understand their own lives through autobiography, and sometimes to characterize that kind of understanding.¹⁸ There is no need to stake out some exclusively philosophical perspective. This book, for example, does not try to portray the whole of Oppenheimer's life or to consider anything in it after 1945. Wittgenstein compared philosophy to a slow bicycle race. "This is how philosophers should salute each other: 'Take your time!'"¹⁹ A philosopher does not find it odd to slow the pace of inquiry to a degree that the most minute historian would find intolerable. Even more narrowly, this is a study of only one choice, or series of choices, that Oppenheimer made, together with their context. Perhaps characteristically for philosophy, it reflects not just on

Oppenheimer, but on ourselves reflecting on him. Few of the relevant facts are in doubt. The real problem is what to make of them. A large part of the interest is that we do not know what apparatus to use—what attitudes or forms of judgment might be appropriate. Philosophy often requires some reflection on itself just as moral judgment always reflects something on the nature of morality, while useful history need not contain any implications for historiography.

A good deal was written about clarity during the heyday of analytic philosophy in the middle of the last century, as though philosophers had some claim to superior or more precise vision. A less charged ambition could be to sort out different issues and think about them one at a time. This is what is attempted in the chapters of this book. Insofar as Oppenheimer can be seen as representative, he was surely representative of many different questions or themes: the location of choice in a life, the place for responsibility, the relation between scientific theory and action, and so on. This is so even though his fame rests mainly on one single achievement. He, and it, had many dimensions. Most obviously, we can wonder how far a scientific urge toward inquiry can be reconciled with a need to make decisions at a time when their full consequences cannot be known. To draw questions apart and to deal with them separately is not to suggest that they can be autonomous. It is just a step toward any sort of useful progress. But that assertion can be vindicated only by some illuminating results.