Social Structures and their Threats to Moral Agency

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1. The case of J

Imagine first the case of J (who might be anybody, *jemand*). J used to inhabit a social order, or rather an area within a social order, where socially approved roles were unusually well-defined. Responsibilities were allocated to each such role and each sphere of role-structured activity was clearly demarcated. These allocations and demarcations were embodied in and partly constituted by the expectations that others had learned to have of those who occupied each such role. For those who occupied those roles to disappoint those expectations by failing to discharge their assigned responsibilities was to invite severe disapproval and other sanctions. To refuse to find one's place within the hierarchies of approved roles, or to have been refused a place, because judged unfit for any such role, was to be classified as socially deviant and irresponsible.

The key moral concepts that education had inculcated into J were concepts of duty and responsibility. His fundamental moral beliefs were that each of us owes it to others to perform her or his assigned duties and to discharge her or his assigned responsibilities. A good human being performs those duties, discharges those responsibilities, and does not trespass into areas that are not her or his concern. A philosopher who comes across the likes of J will understand his attitudes as cultural parodies, in part of Plato (conceiving of justice as requiring 'that each do her or his own work and not meddle with many things' *Republic* 433a) and in part of Kant (doing one's duty just because it is one's duty and not for the sake of any further end), authors who had influenced J's school teachers. A sociologist will entertain the suspicion that in certain types of social order it may be only in the form of parodies that some types of concept can continue to find expression. But for the moment let us put this thought on one side and return to J.

J, like everyone else, occupied a number of roles. He was a father, the treasurer of his sports club, and in wartime had been a non-

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commissioned officer. Afterwards he spent his working career in the service of the railways, rising to a position in which he was responsible for scheduling passenger and freight trains, monitoring their drivers' performance, and coping with break-downs. Early in that career he had been mildly curious about what 'his' trains carried: commuters or vacationers, pig-iron or cattle. But he was instructed firmly by his superiors to take *no* interest in such questions, but to attend *only* to what belonged to his role, so as not to be irresponsibly distracted. Hence he acquired the habit of taking no cognizance of what his trains carried, a habit that endured through a later period, when the freight consisted in munitions and the passengers were Jews on their way to extermination camps. When still later J was questioned about this, he said sincerely: 'I did not know. It was not for someone in my position to know. I did my duty. I did not fail in my responsibilities. You cannot charge me with moral failure.' Was J's defence adequate?

2. Moral agency

To many the answer will be obvious and that answer is 'No'. Their answer presupposes a widely shared conception of moral agency. On this view to be a moral agent is to be justifiably held responsible. Responsible for what? For one's actions, certainly, but for one's actions in at least three respects. First moral agents so conceived are justifiably and uncontroversially held responsible for that in their actions which is intentional. Secondly they may be justifiably held responsible for incidental aspects of those actions of which they should have been aware. And thirdly they may be justifiably held responsible for at least some of the reasonably predictable effects of their actions.

It is in spelling out the second and third of these that we encounter complexities. Consider two examples. I intentionally in my role as examiner award the prize to the competitor with highest marks, incidentally awarding the prize to the most arrogant competitor, and having reasonable grounds for predicting that the effect of the award will be to make him even more objectionable. But in this case it is my responsibility, because of my role, to ignore these latter considerations. Contrast a second example. I intentionally return a handgun to its owner, as my role in the lost property office requires, incidentally and, as it happens, knowingly returning it to someone dangerously paranoid, and having reasonable grounds for predicting that in consequence someone innocent will be harmed. In this case, because I am aware of these latter aspects of my action,

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I am justifiably held responsible for them, and, even if I had not known what I did, I might, at least in certain circumstances, be justifiably held responsible for not having found out what I should have found out. What the first example makes clear is that we may indeed sometimes be able to rebut charges that we were responsible for not taking cognizance of certain facts by citing a role that required us not to take account of them. And what the second example makes clear is that sometimes we are justifiably held responsible for not having made ourselves aware of certain facts about our actions, whatever the requirements of our role may have been.

How is the one type of case to be discriminated from the other? Two remarks are sufficient, not to answer this question, but to return us to the case of J. The first is that it is part of the responsibility of moral agents, on this view of moral agency, to know how at the level of practice to discriminate between such cases, and to give reasons for so discriminating, in the light of the best standards available. One reason, although only one, why children, the mentally retarded and those suffering from some kinds of brain damage are denied the status of moral agent, or at least of fully-fledged moral agent, is that they are unable to do this. And, if we hold J responsible for knowing what he was doing, whatever the requirements of his role might have been, we are ascribing to J just such a power of reasonable discrimination. Yet we are entitled to hold J responsible only if the best standards available to J would have warranted him in making those reasonable discriminations that we judge that he ought to have made. So what were the best standards available to J?

Here a second remark is to the point. J had been taught that the unquestionably best standards were in fact the standards defining and governing the role requirements of his social order. His habits of mind and action had been formed in a culture in which the truth of this claim was generally taken for granted, so that those whose expectations were that J would do what his role required, and who held him accountable, shared his view that the established standards were the unquestionably best standards. So, if we condemn J, we are treating him as justifiably responsible, not only for his actions and for his knowledge of them, and not only also for his practical reasoning, but in addition for having failed to question the hitherto unquestioned. We are taking the view that responsible deliberation requires that on occasion one puts established standards in question, whatever verdict about them one may arrive at in the end.

Moral agents, that is to say, are on this view justifiably held responsible for the standards governing the reasoning from which

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their actions flow and they have to understand themselves as thus responsible. When J attempted to rebut the accusations advanced against him by saying that he had discharged all his responsibilities, he laid himself open to the questions of what reason he had for taking his socially assigned responsibilities to be his only responsibilities and of what reason he had for continuing to believe that the established standards governing his deliberations were the best standards. By having failed to ask, let alone to answer these questions, J's defence of his deliberate setting of limits to his knowledge also fails, or rather it fails, provided that we are justified in ascribing to J the full powers of moral agency. But is it possible that we are not so justified?

That human beings have by their specific nature a capacity for recognizing that they have good reason to acknowledge the authority of evaluative and normative standards that are independent of those embodied in the institutions of their own particular social and cultural order, and so share equally in a capacity to be able to transcend in thought the limitations of those established standards, has been a widely held doctrine. Disagreements about what these evaluative and normative standards prescribe and what awareness of their authority consists in have not precluded widespread agreement in ascribing to normal adult human beings as such a capacity that makes them responsible as individuals for not putting their established social and cultural order to the question, if and when they have occasion to do so. So it would seem that it can be justifiably asserted of J that as a normal human being he must have had the powers of moral agency and therefore had the responsibility for doing what he failed to do.

Yet questions arise. If we were to spell out further what it is to be a moral agent, it would be crucial to note that one cannot be a moral agent without understanding oneself as a moral agent at the level of one's everyday practice and that one cannot exercise the powers of a moral agent, unless one is able to understand oneself as justifiably held responsible in virtue of one's ability to exercise those powers. But there are good reasons for believing that how human beings are able to understand themselves depends in key part upon and is always in some ways limited by the nature of the social and cultural order they inhabit. The question therefore is: are there or might there be types of social structure that would prevent those who inhabited them from understanding themselves as moral agents? Or if this seems to envisage too extreme a state of affairs, are there or might there be types of social structure that seriously threaten the possibility of understanding oneself as a moral agent and so of acting as a moral agent?

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3. What is it to understand oneself as a moral agent?

What then is it to understand oneself as a moral agent at the level of everyday practice? Three characteristics of such self-understanding are relevant. First, I have to understand myself as and to present myself to others as someone with an identity other than the identities of role and office that I assume in each of the roles that I occupy. I have to understand myself as someone who brings with her or himself to each role qualities of mind and character that belong to her or him *qua* individual and not *qua* role-player. It is a mistake to think of the relationship of individuals to roles as being the same as or closely similar to that of stage actors to the dramatic parts that they play. For the lives of individuals are constituted in large part by the various roles that they play, although they are generally able to reflect upon their role-playing in ways that are not dictated by those same roles. It is characteristically, even if not only, in *how* they play out their roles that individuals exhibit their individual character. What more there is to individuals than their role-playing also includes the continuities of each individual's history, as they move from role to role, from one sphere of social activity to another. My awareness of and understanding of myself as an individual is exhibited in and partly constituted by the various acknowledgments of that individuality by others and my ability to respond to those others as individuals and not just as role-players. This mutual acknowledgment of our individuality characterizes some of our social relationships rather than others and some of our social relationships more markedly than others. And central among such acknowledgments are those judgments in which we evaluate individuals as individuals, in respect of their virtues and the goodness of their lives. But initially such judgments, we should note, just as much as our judgments about individuals as role-players, are generally governed by socially established standards. We all begin unquestioningly with the unquestioned.

Secondly, moral agents have to understand themselves not just as individuals, but as practically rational individuals. If moral agents are to be able to put in question those socially established standards, both standards defining and governing their roles and standards to which they appeal in evaluating individuals, they are going to have to understand themselves as entitled to rationally justifiable confidence in the critical judgments about those standards at which they arrive. Confidence is necessary, because these are practical judgments that are to provide them with reasons that will issue in action. Rationally justifiable confidence is necessary, because the critical response of the moral agent has to be distinguished from, and to

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present itself to others as distinguished from, mindless deviance and revolt. So the moral agent has to be entitled to confidence in her or his own moral judgments, when they are of the form 'Even although it is almost universally agreed in this social order that in these circumstances someone in my role should act thus, I judge that I should act otherwise.' What entitles someone to confidence in such judgments?

We are always liable to error in making particular moral judgments, sometimes intellectual errors such as going beyond the evidence or relying upon some unsubstantiated generalization, sometimes moral errors such as being over-influenced by our liking and disliking of particular individuals or projecting on to a situation some unrecognized phantasy or exhibiting either insensitivity to or sentimentality about suffering. And our intellectual errors are often rooted in moral errors. We need therefore to have tested our capacity for moral deliberation and judgment in this and that type of situation by subjecting our arguments and judgments systematically to the critical scrutiny of reliable others, of co-workers, family, friends. Such others, of course, are not always reliable and some may influence us in ways that strengthen the propensity to error. So to have confidence in our deliberations and judgments we need social relationships of a certain kind, forms of social association in and through which our deliberations and practical judgments are subjected to extended and systematic critical questioning that will teach us how to make judgments in which both we and others may have confidence. But this is not all.

Moral agents also have to understand themselves as accountable, not only in their roles, but also as rational individuals. The responsibilities that are socially assigned to roles are defined in part by the types of accountability that attach to each of them. For each role there is a range of particular others, to whom, if they fail in their responsibilities, they owe an account that either excuses or admits to the offence and accepts the consequences. Without such accountability the notion of responsibility would be largely empty. For failure in responsibility would lack those consequences, the enforcement of which is an important aspect of the social recognition of roles. But, if the notion of responsibility is deprived of significant content, when responsibility is detached from accountability, what follows about the responsibility of moral agents *qua* moral agents? To whom are they to understand themselves as accountable? To at least two sets of individuals and groups: those with whom they have engaged together in critically informed deliberation and those whose hitherto unquestioning reliance on the established standards of the social order they challenge by their deliberation and their

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action. To the former they owe an account of why they take it that their reasons for action have been able to withstand the strongest criticisms so far directed against them. To the latter they owe an account of why their reasons for challenging the established standards are good reasons. In giving such accounts they are inviting those who have hitherto accepted the established standards also to engage with them in critical deliberative conversation. And in understanding themselves and those others as accountable they understand themselves and those others as moral agents.

Accountability to particular others, participation in critical practical enquiry and acknowledgment of the individuality both of others and of oneself are all then marks of the social relationships and mode of self-understanding that characterize the moral agent. Strip away those social relationships and that mode of self-understanding and what would be left would be a seriously diminished type of agency, one unable to transcend the limitations imposed by its own social and cultural order. Moral agency thus does seem to require a particular kind of social setting.

There must therefore be a place in any social order in which the exercise of the powers of moral agency is to be a real possibility for milieus in which reflective critical questioning of standards hitherto taken for granted is an activity that is at home. These too must be milieus of everyday practice in which the established standards are, when it is appropriate, put to the question at the point at which they dictate to everyday practice and not just in an abstract and general way. The necessary presupposition of such questioning is some more or less shared conception of what it is to be a good human being that focuses upon those qualities which individuals possess or fail to possess *qua* individuals, independently of their roles, and which are exemplified in part by their capacity or their lack of capacity to stand back from and reconsider their engagement with the established role-structures. And we may remind ourselves that just this capacity to stand back was what J lacked.

Those qualities are the virtues and in different times and places the catalogue of the virtues is not always the same and particular virtues are sometimes understood differently. But there is a core notion of the virtues as qualities of human beings as such and, central to it, there is an acknowledgment of two virtues, without which the other virtues cannot be possessed. To those virtues I give their traditional names of 'integrity' and 'constancy'. To have integrity is to refuse to be, to have educated oneself so that one is no longer able to be, one kind of person in one social context, while quite another in other contexts. It is to have set inflexible limits to one's adaptability to the roles that one may be called upon to play.

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Constancy, like integrity, sets limits to flexibility of character. Where integrity requires of those who possess it, that they exhibit the same moral character in different social contexts, constancy requires that those who possess it pursue the same goods through extended periods of time, not allowing the requirements of changing social contexts to distract them from their commitments or to redirect them. So individuals with these two virtues will learn not only how to occupy some determinate set of roles within their social order, but also how to think of their goods and of their character independently of the requirements of those roles. They will, that is to say, be inhabitants of not just one, but of two moral systems, that of the established social order with its assignment of roles and responsibilities and that developed within those milieus in which that assignment has been put to the question. The degree to which these two systems are at odds with each other varies in different social and cultural orders. Those whose social and cultural order is such that the two systems present requirements that it is difficult to render compatible will be forced either to think their way through a series of more or less painful choices or to find some strategy for evading these choices.

The thinking that is needed is practical thinking, thinking that may occasionally be driven to extend its resources by opening up theoretical questions, but even then always for the sake of practice. The milieus in which such thinking is at home are, as I have already said, those of everyday practice, of the everyday life of certain kinds of family and household, of certain kinds of workplace, of certain kinds of school and church, and of a variety of kinds of local community. And what their flourishing will always be apt to generate is tension, tension that may develop into conflict between the requirements of the established social and moral order and the attitudes of those educated in those social settings that make the exercise of the powers of moral agency possible. So to be a moral agent is to have the potentiality for living and acting in a state of tension or, if need be, conflict between two moral points of view. And this is never simply or mainly a tension or a conflict between points of view at the level of abstract and general theory. It is always primarily a tension or a conflict between socially embodied points of view, between modes of practice.

The history of moral philosophy has usually been written—except for those historians influenced by Augustine, Marx or Nietzsche—in such a way as to disguise this fact. Why does this matter? It is because it is from these tensions and conflicts, when and in so far as they are present, that morality gets an important part of its content. There are of course social and cultural orders in

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which tension, let alone conflict, between such rival moral systems has not yet been generated to any significant degree. But, whenever it has been so generated, it defines an area in which at least some moral agents find themselves with particular responsibilities to discharge. Consider how this might be so with regard to truthfulness, considered as one essential constituent of the human good. Both Aquinas and Kant hold that it is wrong to tell a lie in any circumstance whatsoever. But one could refrain from lying throughout one's life without having done what is required of one in one's own particular circumstance, if one is to achieve the good of truthfulness. For truthfulness requires of us that, when it is of peculiar importance that rational agents should understand some particular aspect of their lives, so that they are neither misled nor deceived, it is a responsibility of those who are truthful to disclose what is relevant to such understanding. But what it is relevant to disclose is in key part determined by the limitations of the contemporary role-structure and the ways in which its assigning of responsibilities may obscure from view just that about which the virtue of truthfulness requires that we and others should be undeceived. Conflicts about whose responsibility it is to know about what are therefore among those that in particular circumstances, especially the circumstances of distinctively modern societies, provide content for the requirements of morality. 'Always ask about any social and cultural order what it needs its inhabitants not to know' has become an indispensable sociological maxim. 'Always ask about your own social and cultural order what it needs you and others not to know' has become an indispensable moral maxim.

What degrees and kinds of tension and conflict are engendered by the incompatibilities of established role requirements and the demands of the virtues varies of course from social order to social order. There are societies in which the potentiality for such conflict has not yet been realized, societies in which conflict has been effectively contained, societies in which conflict has disrupted and fragmented, sometimes creatively, sometimes destructively. So that often a key moral question is that of how best to find our way through conflict. Notice also that the dimensions of moral conflict are more than moral, at least if morality is narrowly conceived: they are moral-cum-political, moral-cum-economic, moral-cum-religious, indeed sometimes moral-cum-religious-cum-political-cum-economic; and remember too that the established norms and values with which we may be invited to enter into conflict will commonly be to some large degree our own norms and values, the norms and values by which we have hitherto been guided. So that initially at least that conflict will be within each of us.

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(Such conflict is not only a matter of incompatibility between two sets of practically embodied norms and values. It is also a matter of a certain resistance to critical questioning that claims about the limitations and errors of the standpoint of the established order are apt to evoke. And we may in some cases be misled about the nature and degree of such resistance, if we are naïve in our identification of the norms and values of the established order. For there are types of social order, including our own, in which those norms themselves not only legitimate but encourage questioning, criticism and protest, so that the set of approved social roles includes such roles as those of the Indignant Protester and the Angry Young Person and activities of criticism and protest are themselves governed by prescribed routines. We need then to draw a line between conflict that is internal to and in no way a threat to an established order and conflict that is more radical, conflict that genuinely raises the question of whether established roles and routines can or cannot be justified in the light of the best account we have of the human good. It is conflict of this latter kind that social orders may need to contain or suppress, if they are to continue functioning as they have done.)

Where then has the argument taken us? We began with the case of J, who asserted that he could not be justifiably held responsible for his part in making the massacre of Jews possible, because he did not know what or whom his trains were carrying and because it was not his responsibility to know this, given his social role and the standards defining the responsibilities of anyone occupying that role. To this it was replied that moral agents are responsible for critical scrutiny of the standards governing their practical reasoning about their responsibilities, including their responsibilities for knowledge of their actions. Therefore, if J, a psychologically normal human being, was capable of exercising the powers of moral agency, J was responsible for his lack of knowledge and so indirectly for his participation in massacring Jews. What then might have prevented J, even though a psychologically normal individual, from exercising the powers of moral agency?

How we answered this question depended upon an identification of three types of precondition for the exercise of the powers of moral agency. First, the powers of moral agency can only be exercised by those who understand themselves as moral agents, and, that is to say, by those who understand their moral identity as to some degree distinct from and independent of their social roles. To understand oneself thus is to understand that one's goodness as a human being, the answer that by one's whole way of life one gives to the question 'How is it best for a human being in my circum-

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stances to live?', is not to be equated with one's goodness at being and doing what this or that role requires.

Secondly, the powers of moral agency can only be exercised by those who are able to justify rational confidence in their judgments about the goodness and badness of human beings and this ability requires participation in social relationships and in types of activity in which one's reflective judgments emerge from systematic dialogue with others and are subject to critical scrutiny by others. Without milieus within which such relationships and activities are effectively sustained the possibility of the exercise of the powers of moral agency will be undermined. Those who participate in the relationships and activities of such milieus will always find themselves in potential conflict with, and often in actual conflict with, the requirements of established role structures and therefore with those who uphold those requirements. And it is in part by defining their relationship to those conflicts that they give content to what the virtues require of them in this or that particular situation.

Moreover—and thirdly—it is only in and through such milieus that moral agents become able to understand themselves as accountable to others in respect of the human virtues and not just in respect of their role-performances. So all three preconditions can be satisfied only within social orders in which there exist milieus, spheres of activity, which sustain the relevant kind of understanding of the self, the relevant kind of critical discourse and reflection, and the relevant kind of accountability. The question therefore is: are there types of social structure that preclude the existence of such milieus, so that the very possibility of the exercise of the powers of moral agency might be threatened? The type of structure that I shall use as an example is very different in some respects from that inhabited by J. But it is worth beginning with a more extreme case.

4. The structures of compartmentalization

In the nineteen seventies I was a minor participant in a study of the moral dimensions of decision-making in the American electric power industry (For the principal findings see *Values in the Electric Power Industry* ed. Kenneth Sayre, University of Notre Dame Press, 1977). One incidental discovery in the course of that study was that power company executives tended to a significant degree to answer what were substantially the same questions somewhat differently, depending on whether they took themselves to be responding *qua* power company executive or *qua* parent and head of household or *qua* concerned citizen. That is to say, their attitudes varied

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with their social roles and they seemed quite unaware of this. I take this to be a mild example of a peculiarly modern phenomenon that I will call compartmentalization.

Compartmentalization goes beyond that differentiation of roles and institutional structures that characterizes every social order and it does so by the extent to which each distinct sphere of social activity comes to have its own role structure governed by its own specific norms in relative independence of other such spheres. Within each sphere those norms dictate which kinds of consideration are to be treated as relevant to decision-making and which are to be excluded. So in the power company case executives were unable even to entertain, as a serious policy alternative, reduction in the overall levels of power consumption, so long as they thought and spoke from within their sphere of activity as power company executives, but they did not suffer from the same inability when thinking and speaking as consumers or concerned citizens.

This relative autonomy of each demarcated sphere of activity is reinforced by the degree to which in contemporary advanced societies individuals encountered in each particular sphere are often not the same as those whom one meets elsewhere. When one encounters each individual only within some particular sphere, in some role that is a counterpart to one's own role in that particular sphere, then one's responses are increasingly only to the-individual-in-this-or-that-role rather than to the individual who happens to be occupying this role at this time. So individuals as they move between spheres of activity, exchanging one role for another and one set of standards for their practical reasoning for another, become to some important extent dissolved into their various roles, playing one part in the life of the family, quite another in the workplace, yet a third as a member of a sports club and a fourth as a military reservist. Within each sphere such individuals conform to the requirements imposed on their role within that sphere and there is no milieu available to them in which they are able, together with others, to step back from those roles and those requirements and to scrutinize themselves and the structure of their society from some external standpoint with any practical effect.

Consider the different forms that the ethics of deception may take in different spheres, the different answers given to such questions as 'Who is justified in deceiving whom and about what?' and 'Who has the authority to object to deception?' A first example is that of a business corporation whose chief executive officer decides to exaggerate the progress made by the corporation's scientists on a research project, with the aims both of not losing customers to rivals and of bolstering share prices. Here the scientists have no

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right to lie to or otherwise deceive the CEO—not to do so is a condition of their continuing employment—and they likewise have no right to speak out. The only grounds on which objection to such deception can be based, if it is to be heard, is that in the longer run deception will fail to maximize corporate profits. (A former Chairman of the Securities Exchange Commission explained his decision to endow a Chair in Business Ethics at Harvard by claiming that in the long run ethics pays.)

Contrast with this the situation of those same scientists when publishing their data in professional journals. In this context no end external to scientific enquiry is allowed to justify deception. The falsification of data warrants their exposure by other scientists and their consequent expulsion from the scientific community. So the individual who recurrently moves between the spheres of corporate activity and of independent scientific enquiry exchanges each time that he or she does so one ethics of deception for another, often without any consciousness of so doing.

That same individual will of course also move into yet other contexts with their own ethics of deception, for example, the kind of social occasion in which relative strangers meet, drink in hand, anxious to make a favorable impression on prestigious people and equally anxious to avoid garrulous and insistent bores. Here deception, including lying, is generally a sanctioned aspect of the work of self-presentation—without it I might not be able to make myself sufficiently interesting—and I may defend myself from aggressive conversational intrusions by further lies. Each of these three ethics of deception does of course need further elaboration, but that elaboration would only strengthen the grounds for concluding that the norms of deception are specific to social context and that to move from one role in one sphere of activity to another in another is to move from one context-based moral standpoint to another.

We encounter a similar range of differences in contemporary attitudes to death. Contrast the attitudes to death exhibited within the sphere of family life by those mourning the death of a child in an automobile accident, within that of the executives of the corporation that manufactured the automobile, and within that of the lawyers who urge the family to sue the driver of the automobile. For family members the death is a unique loss for which nothing can compensate, for the corporate executives it contributes to an annual death rate that is an acceptable trade-off for the benefits of automobile sales to their industry and to society, and for the lawyers it has a precise financial value calculable on the basis of recent jury awards. And it is possible to adopt the attitudes dictated by any of these three perspectives only by temporarily excluding those of the

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other two. So those who move from extending their condolences at the grave-side to a meeting of automobile company executives reevaluating their production goals to the offices of a law firm will find the same death evaluated in ways that are not only different, but to some degree incompatible (I have treated this a little more fully in 'Some Enlightenment projects reconsidered' in *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy* R. Kearney and M. Dooley (eds), London: Routledge, 1998, pp. 255–6) and this often enough without any awareness of the incompatibility. Here again each sphere of activity has its own norms and values. But compartmentalization involves more than this in two respects: the degree to which each sphere of activity is insulated from others, so that considerations that would carry weight in some other sphere are deprived of it in this; and the absence of any accessible sphere of activity in which practically effective reasoning might be used to evaluate the norms and values of each particular sphere from some external point of view.

Insulation is provided by the prescribed standard responses to the introduction into the conversations within some particular sphere of considerations that are by its norms at best irrelevant, at worst distracting. So, if in a policy meeting of the Midwestern power executives one of them had proposed attempting to bring about an overall reduction in power consumption, or if at a social gathering someone were to insist that the standards of truthfulness required in scientific reports should also apply to party gossip, their remarks might be treated as a joke or ignored, but, if such a speaker persisted, they would find themselves deprived at least temporarily of their status in that sphere of activity, treated, that is, as a source of background noise rather than a participant. And the effects of insulation are reinforced by the absence from everyday life of milieus in the home, the workplace and elsewhere in which such agents might engage in extended critical reflection with others about, for example, what conflicts the virtue of truthfulness requires us to engage in in that time and place and just how its requirements are at odds with the established ethics of deception in each sphere of activity or about what the significance of death is. Such milieus would provide agents with what they otherwise lack, an understanding of themselves as having a substantive identity independent of their roles and as having responsibilities that do not derive from those roles, so overcoming divisions within the self imposed by compartmentalization and so setting the scene for types of conflict that compartmentalization effectively suppresses.

This divided self has to be characterized negatively, by what it lacks. It is not only without any standpoint from which it can pass

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critical judgment on the standards governing its various roles, but it must also lack those virtues of integrity and constancy that are prerequisites for exercising the powers of moral agency. It cannot have integrity, just because its allegiance to this or that set of standards is always temporary and context-bound. And it cannot have the constancy that is expressed in an unwavering directedness, since it recurrently changes direction, as it moves from sphere to sphere. Indeed its conception of a virtue will generally be one of excellence in role performance rather than of excellence as a human being and hence what is judged excellent in one role-governed context may be very different from and even sometimes incompatible with what is judged excellent in others. (This context-bound use of the concept of a virtue parodies older conceptions and older uses and in so doing may remind us of J whose uses of moral concepts were also parodies. But for the moment let us put this resemblance to J on one side.) Lacking these, and lacking also an awareness that it lacks these, there is nothing about the self thus divided that is liable to generate conflict with what are taken to be the requirements of morality with the established order. So in so far as that self recognizes and aspires to conform to what it takes to be moral requirements, within each particular sphere of activity, it will be a morality from which the elements of potential and actual conflict are missing, a diminished morality that matches its diminished powers of agency.

It must therefore seem that so far as individuals approach the condition of this divided self, they can no longer be justifiably held responsible for their actions in anything like the ways in which moral agents are held responsible. Here, it seems, there is indeed a type of social structure that warrants for those who inhabit it a plea of gravely diminished responsibility. And we may be tempted therefore to turn immediately to the question of whether the earlier twentieth century society that J inhabited sufficiently resembled later forms of compartmentalized social and cultural order for us to enter a similar plea on J's behalf. But this would be a mistake. For we need first to consider some further dimensions of this divided self.

It is, I shall argue, a self that is to a significant degree responsible for its own divisions. It is indeed to be characterized negatively in terms of lacks or absences, but these lacks or absences are, so I will suggest, the expression of refusals, active refusals by that self. A number of aspects of its activity are relevant. First, it can never be dissolved nor dissolve itself *entirely* into the distinctive roles that it plays in each compartmentalized sphere of activity. It exhibits for one thing a quality that both it and some others understand as a virtue of the individual as such and not just of the individual-in-

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this-or-that-role, a virtue that is a newcomer to the catalogue of the virtues: adaptability, flexibility, knowing chameleon-like how to take on the color of this or that social background. And it exhibits this virtue in managing its transitions from one role to another, so that it appears, so far as possible, to be dissolved into its roles. But this appearance is, when well-managed, a dramatic feat, an expression of the actor as well as of the roles enacted.

Secondly, the individual *qua* individual appears not only in managing the transitions from one role to another, but also, as I suggested earlier, in the role-playing itself. There are some roles that may seem purely mechanical, since the individual who plays the role can always be replaced by a machine: where there was once a ticket-seller, there is now a ticket-machine. But the ticket-seller always faced choices that machines never confront: *how* to play her or his role, cheerfully or sullenly, carelessly or conscientiously, efficiently or inefficiently. And for all roles, the way in which the role is enacted presupposes not only an answer to a question posed to and by the role-player: 'How is it best for me to play this role?', but also to such further questions: 'By what standards am I to judge what is best?' and 'Should I continue to play this role in this way?' It is the inescapability on occasion of such questions that suggests that practical reasoning that is adequate for doing what a particular role requires will itself generate reasons for acting beyond those requirements and even sometimes against those requirements. To resist asking such questions, to insist upon terminating one's practical reasoning whenever it directs one beyond one's role requires a peculiar kind of self-discipline. To be able to restrict one's practical reasoning to what will enable one to discharge the responsibilities of one's socially approved roles is to have imposed on one's thinking a set of artificial restrictions. It is to have arbitrarily closed one's mind to certain possibilities of action. And, although others may provide one with motives for effecting such a closure, it is only with one's own active co-operation that the habits of mind can be developed which make such closure possible.

What is true of practical reasoning generally holds with special force of those periods during which, but for avoidance strategies, one might find that one had committed oneself to incompatible judgments. The divided self of a compartmentalized social order, in order not to have to confront incompatible attitudes to, say, truthfulness or death has to have developed habits of mind that enable it not to attend to what it would have to recognize as its own incoherences, if it were to understand itself apart from its involvements in each of its particular roles in each distinct sphere. And to learn how to focus one's attention in this way once again requires one's active co-operation.

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I conclude that what I earlier characterized as lacks or absences of the divided selves of a compartmentalized social order are better described as active refusals and denials. The divided self is complicit with others in bringing about its own divided states and so can be justly regarded as their co-author. It and those others can justifiably be called to account for what they have jointly made of themselves. They may indeed inhabit a type of social and cultural order whose structures to some large degree inhibit the exercise of the powers of moral agency. But they share in responsibility for having made themselves into the kind of diminished agent that they are. Their responsibility is that of co-conspirators, engaged together in a conspiracy that functions so that they can lead blamelessly compliant lives, able plausibly to plead lack of knowledge of as well as lack of control over outcomes for which they might otherwise be held jointly responsible. Their lack of knowledge and their lack of control are often enough real, an inescapable outcome of the structuring of roles and responsibilities in a compartmentalized social order. But they are, so I have argued, responsible and accountable for making it the case that they do not know and that they lack certain powers. They are not passive victims. To have understood this enables us to return to the case of J.

5. Once more the case of J

I take the social structures of compartmentalization, although peculiar to the late twentieth century, to be more generally instructive, just because they provide us with a case at the extremes, a case in which, after compartmentalization has progressed beyond a certain point, many agents exhibit no awareness of responsibilities beyond those assigned to them by their roles in each particular sphere of activity, while in their practical reasoning they admit as premises only those considerations sanctioned in each context by the norms defining and governing those roles. Their lives express the social and cultural order that they inhabit in such a way that they have become unable to recognize, let alone to transcend its limitations. They do not have the resources that would enable them to move to an independent standpoint.

Both their resemblances to and their differences from J and those like him are worth remarking. Both J and those who inhabit a compartmentalized society accept unquestioningly structures that give definition to their lives by prescribing a range of roles that they are to occupy and a range of responsibilities attached to each. And it is not only what they are to do in each type of social context that is

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prescribed. What kind of practical reasoning it is for each of them to undertake, *qua* enactor of this or that role, what it is the responsibility of each to know, and what is not matter for their concern or knowledge are also prescribed. And in so far as both are deprived of participation in milieus in which in the company of others they might have elaborated a standpoint external to their role-structured activities, they have become unable to pass judgment on the limitations of their judgments. These are the resemblances, but there are also striking differences.

For J and those like him exhibited an awareness of their situation that is absent from those who inhabit a compartmentalized society. J judged that this way of life was the best way of life for him and for others. It is true that he did not and perhaps could not open up this judgment to any extended reflective scrutiny. But he made it and was capable of making it proudly and defiantly. Judgments about compartmentalization and its effects upon the lives of those subject to it are necessarily third-person judgments delivered from some standpoint that has escaped those effects. J was able to deliver judgment on the organization of his social life in the first person. What kind of difference does this signify?

At least this: that, if those who inhabit a compartmentalized social order can be held responsible as co-authors of their social and moral situation, then the case for imputing such responsibility to J and those like him must be even stronger. For J actively chose not to move beyond the boundaries imposed by established role-definitions. He had made himself into what the roles said that he was. By so doing he had assented to doing, reasoning and knowing only as the standards governing his roles prescribed. And in so assenting he had excluded the possibility of moral conflict. He did not allow himself to pass judgment on the judgments that he made in accordance with those established standards and so rendered himself unable to raise the question of what it was about which he was required to know and required to be truthful. For truthfulness as a virtue was itself defined for J by the context-bound standards governing his role-performances, so that much that truthfulness requires had become invisible.

I argued earlier that 'Always ask about your social and cultural order what it needs you and others not to know' has become in the modern world an indispensable moral maxim. J, like those subject to the limitations of a compartmentalized social order, had co-operated in making it impossible to acknowledge the authority of this maxim. But J's refusal of such knowledge made him too responsible, in co-operation with others, for not knowing what he did not know. So J's later defence of his earlier actions failed.

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It has been my assumption that when J defended himself by denying that he had had the relevant knowledge, he was sincere. Some commentators have insisted that J and those like him must have had that knowledge and that therefore they were guilty, thus implying that if they had not had that knowledge, then they would have been innocent. I have contended by contrast that, even if J and those like him did not have that knowledge, they remained guilty and that their guilt was not merely individual guilt, but, in a sense that I hope has been made clear, the guilt of a whole social and cultural order.

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