



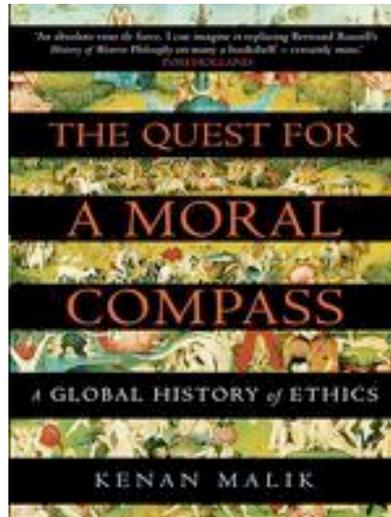
# Ethical Holy Grail

**The Quest for a Moral Compass • Kenan Malik • Atlantic Books • 2014**

**B**OOKS written in English on the history of morality tend to concentrate on western thought and offer rather abstract, not to say heavy, discussions of the key figures. Kenan Malik's excellent new work is different. First, it is a truly global history which also encompasses Hindu, Buddhist, Chinese and Islamic writings. Secondly, it is a highly lucid and immensely readable survey in which Malik wears his learning lightly. The reader will readily gain a greater knowledge of the search for the elusive ethical holy grail and a greater insight into the complexities of human behaviour. It is quite simply one of the three best recent books on intellectual history, the others being Steven Pinker's *The Better Angels of our Nature* (2011) and Anthony Pagden's *The Enlightenment and Why It Still Matters* (2013).

Malik begins with the ancient Greeks, including Homer, Aeschylus, the Presocratics, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. He has much to say about the Stoics, including the second-century philosopher Hierocles, whose *Elements of Ethics* refers to the concept of concentric circles. Each individual stands at the centre of the first circle. Next comes the immediate family, followed by the extended family, the local community, the country, and finally the entire human race. To be virtuous, Hierocles suggested, is to draw these circles together, constantly to transfer people from the outer circles to the inner circles, to treat strangers as cousins and cousins as brothers and sisters, making all human beings part of our concern. Epictetus indeed thought that everyone should 'call himself a citizen of the world'.

This process, known by the Greeks as *oikeiosis*, is alive today, though we might add the animal kingdom and even the earth itself as further outer circles. The notion provides the title of Peter Singer's book *The Expanding Circle*. In his *History of European Morals* (1869), Lecky regarded it as the key element of humankind's moral progress from primitive times.



A key feature of Malik's approach is indeed to demonstrate that while different cultures and eras have had some different notions of morality, there are also many common themes. This is apparent in his detailed treatment of Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam, as well as Christianity. Thus the Golden Rule was formulated by Kongzi, better known in the West as Confucius, 500 years before Jesus as: "Do not inflict on others what you yourself would not wish done to you". It surely remains as a fundamental principle of morality in the modern era.

Malik returns constantly to the question of the basis of morality. Obviously, the monotheistic religions argued that it is God's law. Nor was there any point in asking, as Socrates did, whether God's law is good. "Morality was indeed arbitrary. That was the whole point of it" (p171). Yet most secular philosophers have not been satisfied with this (non) answer. Malik gives excellent outlines of the ethical philosophies of Hume (morality is based on emotion and our benevolent nature), Kant (morality is based on reason and duty) and Hutcheson-Bentham-Mill (morality is based on consequence and the greatest happiness of the greatest number).

Entering the modern era in a chapter entitled 'The Unravelling of

Morality', he discusses what many regard as the current moral crisis, which he says was heralded by the Cambridge philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe in a 1958 paper and developed further by writers such as Alasdair MacIntyre in his 1981 book *After Virtue*. For MacIntyre the Enlightenment was the main culprit because it denied any external purpose in life and substituted the sovereignty of the individual for objective values. Yet of course this is a religious critique, reinforced by the fact that both Anscombe and MacIntyre converted to Catholicism.

Though Malik is highly critical of their argument, he also questions attempts by so-called New Atheists such as Sam Harris (in *The Moral Landscape*, 2010) to root morality in science. "The irony is that the classic argument against looking to God as the source of moral values – the Euthyphro dilemma – is equally applicable to the claim that science is, or should be, the arbiter of good and evil" (p317). If wellbeing is defined simply by the existence of certain neural states, or particular hormones or whatever, then the notion of wellbeing is arbitrary.

Malik ends by quoting *Man's Search for Meaning* (1946), written by Viktor Frankel, who had spent three years in concentration camps, including six months in Auschwitz. Humans, he suggests, find themselves only through meaning in the world, and that meaning exists in our relationship with others. What can possibly be more Humanist than that?

Perhaps the best recommendation for Malik's terrific survey is that it was rubbished by John Gray in the *New Statesman* (6th-12th June). He believes that progress for the human animal, with its 'perpetually warring moralities', is an illusion. But Gray, the magazine's lead reviewer, is an anti-humanist, reactionary pessimist, which makes it particularly strange that such fatalistic thinking should constantly besmirch the pages of a left-liberal weekly journal of hope. □