Voltaire, that 18th century scourge of religion, used to refuse to let his friends discuss atheism in front of the servants. Unbelief was one thing between consenting intellectuals in private. But if it spread through society, morality would collapse. ‘I want,’ he said, ‘my lawyer, tailor, valets, even my wife to believe in God. I think that if they do, I shall be robbed less and cheated less.’

For the greater part of human history, religion has been seen as the foundation of morality. In Dostoevsky’s words: if God did not exist, all would be permitted. But this belief must seem to us now decidedly strange. Whether or not we believe in God, we inhabit a culture in which religious teachings are marginal to many people’s moral choices. When did we last hear, in a television discussion or a newspaper editorial, the simple assertion that something was wrong because God or religious doctrine said so? Even a religious leader who said this would nowadays be branded a fundamentalist. Our moral language has effectively been secularised. Religion enters our conversations obliquely and with embarrassment. Yet society survives. The world continues uninterrupted on its course. What is hard for us to understand in retrospect is how anyone could have thought otherwise.

But they did - believers and unbelievers alike. No one more so than the man who more than anyone severed morality from religion: Friedrich Nietzsche. But he did not believe that there could be a smooth transition to a secular morality. On the contrary, there would have to be a transvaluation of all values, a complete redefinition of our mental universe. It was necessary but it would be a nightmare. And in a famous passage, Nietzsche imagines the speech of the madman who announces to a secular world that God is dead and we have killed him: ‘What did we do when we unchained this earth from its sun? ... Are we not plunging continually? ... Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing?’ That is what it would feel like to lose the divine foundations of our moral world. Within a few years of writing those lines, Nietzsche went insane and, shortly thereafter, died.

What is it these thinkers saw that we fail to see? How were religion and morality associated in the first place? And how then, being thought inseparable, did they come to be separated? Above all, what happened to that predicted but strangely invisible tragedy, Voltaire’s collapse of the social order, Nietzsche’s ‘infinite nothing’?

The traditional connection between God and human goodness was straightforward. Revelation was legislation. Heaven had revealed what was right and what was wrong; and if it had not done so, how would we know? It was not that we would have lacked an answer. It was that we would have had too many answers. We would have arrived at the situation described at the end of the Book of Judges: each person doing that which is right in his own eyes. What was more, the Law-Giver was also the Law-
Enforcer. God’s existence guaranteed that the righteous would be rewarded and that evil would be repaid with evil. This answered the question that so troubled Plato: why be good if you can get away with being bad? An all-knowing, all-powerful God ensured that there would be no tax-evaders in the kingdom of heaven. So religion underwrote the terms of morality. The knowledge of God led to virtue and the Day of Judgment put a heavy price on vice.

But for the past several centuries, that view has increasingly come under attack, for reasons that now seem quite clear. God may well have revealed a moral code. But it turned out to be a different moral code for Catholics and Protestants and Muslims and Jews. If we are to sort out what human beings as such should do, we will need something other than revelation. Besides which, as Kant suggested, if you try to get people to be good by rewarding them if they are and punishing them if they are not, you do not actually succeed in getting them to be good. You merely succeed in getting them to be pragmatic. Then again, though this had been noted long before by Abraham and Jeremiah and Job, the view that the world was ruled by God on the principle of justice was difficult to reconcile with the facts. Evil prospered, the righteous for the most part suffered, and virtue had to be content with being its own reward. For people of faith, this only served to show how inscrutable divine justice was. But for those who brought less commitment to bear on the question, it was difficult to see how inscrutable justice was not another name for highly scrutable injustice.

None of these considerations was conclusive in itself. But by the 17th century, other factors were at play. There was the morally ambivalent record of religion itself: its holy wars and persecutions. There was the rise of science as a competing source of knowledge to revelation. And, perhaps above all, there was that crucial transition by which, in Lionel Trilling’s phrase, ‘men became individuals’. It is impossible to pinpoint when and why the first-person-singular moved into independent orbit. But we can detect significant moments: when writers embarked on the new literary form of autobiography; when Rembrandt started painting his long series of self-portraits; when Shakespeare has Polonius say to Laertes, ‘This above all: to thine own self be true.’ The idea of the individual as a reality in itself, apart from its social roles, was beginning to emerge. Whatever the cause, the consequence was clear. The independent self was about to change the course of moral thought.

At some point, the revolutionary idea is born that religion, far from enhancing our moral development, significantly obstructs it. It keeps us in a state of dependency. It takes away from us the need, through trial and error, to find things out for ourselves. We become restless with a demanding Father who dictates the terms of our existence. Religion makes us moral children, and if we are to reach maturity we will have to do without it. This idea, given its fullest expression by Freud, lies at the heart of three centuries of moral reflection: in the slow movement from virtue to authenticity, from morality as something objectively present in nature and society to something authored by the sovereign self.

It begins with Spinoza, excommunicated by the Jewish community of Amsterdam in 1656: an outsider in a community of outsiders. Spinoza saw all religions as human constructs. The legislation of the Bible was not God’s law but Moses’ invention to turn a group of slaves into a nation. ‘This then,’ he said, ‘was the object of the
ceremonial law; that men should do nothing of their own free will, but should always act under external authority. In that sentence we hear the distinctive modern accent of the individual no longer shaped by, but now set over and against, religious commands. Its echoes are taken up and amplified by Kant, who insists that being moral cannot be a matter of submission to an external authority. It must be something that we impose on ourselves in what he called autonomy. Hegel goes further in seeing the Hebrew Bible as the product of a slave mentality. And with an air of Samson pulling the temple down on the Philistines, Nietzsche demolishes the whole structure of Judaeo-Christian ethics as a pious fraud: the bonds placed by the weak upon the strong.

Not all these figures were moral revolutionaries. Kant, in particular, had a high regard for traditional morality and believed that he was merely underpinning it with more solid foundations. But radical consequences were to follow. Once morality was divorced from a theistic vision of man’s place in the universe, it became hard to see how any particular idea of the moral life had precedence over any other. What could provide, beyond what we are and what we want to be, that further dimension of what we ought to be? Science could not do so, because it now examined causes, not ultimate purposes. Nor could anthropology, because all it revealed was the immense variety of pictures different societies have had of the good. The voice of God, which had hitherto given societies their most compelling ethical visions, had now been ruled ultra vires. And so, however conservative their intention, the ultimate effect of these philosophies was to weaken the idea of any moral authority beyond the self.

A fateful process had been set in motion. This was translated, in British philosophy, into a sharp distinction between facts and values; and in French existentialism, into Sartre’s declaration that human existence had no essence. Within three centuries, morality had moved from ‘out there’ to ‘in here’. It had become a matter of individual will or preference or emotion or decision. To suppose that moral judgments could be inferred from facts about the world or human nature was to have the wrong ideas about language or reason or human freedom. Certainly, moral philosophers could no longer tell us what to do; nobody could do that. At most, they could clarify our choices and summon us to have the courage to make them.

This was bound, in the end, to have political implications. So long as moral values were seen to be ‘out there’-in divine commandments or nature or society-it made sense to assume a strong relationship between morality and law. Law enforced objective values. But once the idea took hold that morality was a matter of individual choice, it became hard to see how it could be legislated. You might still talk about a moral consensus. But that hardly justified making illegal what a minority of the population sincerely believed was permissible. That would be what John Stuart Mill called the tyranny of the majority. Instead, so Mill argued, the only ground for making something illegal was that it caused harm to others. By the 1960s, that case seemed irresistible. And in Britain and elsewhere, homosexuality and abortion were legalised. It takes a long time for the speculations of a philosophical avant-garde to become the taken-for-granted commonplaces of ordinary life. But by now they have done so. The orthodoxies of our time are that morality is a private affair, a matter of personal choice, and that the state must be morally neutral.

But this raises a fundamental question. Namely, does morality in any significant sense exist any more? Put this way, the question might seem absurd. After all, we still
use the language of morality. We speak of right and wrong, good and bad, justice and rights. But these are all words which were once thought to refer to objective principles, and it is just these that we now believe do not exist. The use of words like right and wrong suggests that there are impersonal standards by which our choices may be judged. But if there are no such standards, only choices, then moral language becomes an anomaly. Some recent writers have suggested just this: that our moral vocabulary is a vestige of an earlier age, and can no longer be used coherently.

Perhaps the suggestion is not absurd. Pick up any contemporary book on how to live your life. It will begin by asking you to define your goals. It will teach you to organise your time and relationships to achieve them. You will learn assertiveness so as not to be inhibited by other people’s agendas. Missing will be any suggestion of right and wrong. What is right will be what works for you. The great moralist of our time turned out to be Ernest Hemingway when he said, ‘What is moral is what you feel good after and what is immoral is what you feel bad after.’ In such an environment, morality becomes a matter of technique alone: learning how to reach our objectives or achieve self-expression. We no longer talk of virtues but of values, and values are tapes we play on the Walkman of the mind: any tune we choose so long as it does not disturb others.

One of the great motifs of moral thought in the last century has been the crucial importance of private space, the territory in which we are simply free to be ourselves. Rarely in human history has the idea of an obligation imposed on us by others seemed so constricting and suffocating. And this has profound implications for our understanding of a whole range of issues. Marriage has become not a covenant but a contract without binding force beyond the consent of the partners. Families have moved towards more contractual relationships between parents and children. Sexuality is a matter of freely chosen lifestyle. Abortion is the right of a woman over her own body. Euthanasia is the right of each of us over our own lives.

What is missing in each of these cases is the idea once thought to be definitive of morality: that there can be obligations which constrain our choices, and duties that place a limit on desire. It is not that we have stopped thinking morally altogether. It is that our moral imagination is bounded by three central themes: autonomy, equality and rights—the values that allow each of us to be whatever we choose. The central character of our moral drama is no longer the saint or the hero, but the free self, unencumbered by attachments, unobligated by circumstance, freely negotiating its temporary contracts with others: Frank Sinatra singing ‘I did it my way’.

As a result, much of what we used to do as moral beings has come to seem repressive, even a denial of the human condition. To make moral judgments is to be judgmental. Calling a way of life ‘wrong’ is an assault on the integrity or authenticity of others. The most fundamental of all parental wishes, to educate our children in our own morality, is indoctrination and a denial of their free development. We know that not all choices are wise. But we are reluctant to let that fact serve as the basis for a moral conclusion. Instead, we make a distinction between acts and consequences. Acts are freely chosen; consequences are dealt with by the state. So governments are there to treat AIDS, child abuse, homelessness and addiction but not to disseminate a morality that might reduce them in the first place. Something quite revolutionary has happened to our ways of thinking: what I would call the demoralisation of discourse.
We now no longer know what it is to identify a moral issue, as something distinct from personal preference on the one hand or technique on the other. We have arrived at Nietzsche’s conviction that morality is no more than a camouflaged way of imposing our will on others.

Slowly and imperceptibly, it has come to pass after all. The decline of religious ethics has brought about a metamorphosis of conscience into something which it is hard to call morality at all. If God does not exist, all is permitted. Or to put it less dramatically, religion and morality have moved in tandem. They have become privatised and lost their moorings in an objective order. We have reached Nietzsche’s transvaluation of values. But what, then, happened to Nietzsche’s nightmare?

Certainly, we have lost our sense of being part of a single moral community in which very different people are brought together under a canopy of shared values. It has become difficult to see ourselves as part of the collective enterprise that preceded our birth, will persist after our death and which gives meaning to our struggles. Beyond producing and consuming, work and leisure, we find it hard to say what gives meaning to our lives. We have become inarticulate about the reasons for our choices. And the bonds between us, so important to understanding who we are, have become strained. We feel the need to liberate ourselves from our parents. We find it harder to imagine ourselves living on in our children. Each of our relationships, including marriage, has become provisional. The apartment we call the self has grown more self-contained, and therefore lonelier.

These changes have happened slowly and we have adjusted to them, which is why most of the time they are invisible. The greatest exile, as a Jewish mystic said, is not to know that you are in exile. But social commentators have given our situation a name. David Reisman called it ‘The Lonely Crowd’; Peter Berger, ‘The Homeless Mind’; Christopher Lasch, ‘The Culture of Narcissism’. Each of these phrases echoes the sense of being thrown in upon ourselves so that we can no longer hear that voice of the other that in morality was called altruism and, in religion, transcendence.

We cannot go back to where we were. But neither are we condemned to stay where we are. We have reached the limits of individualism and we can now state its inner contradiction. Perhaps the best way of doing so is to think about language. A baby expresses itself by crying; but until it learns a language it cannot tell us what it feels. We learn to speak by growing up among others who speak to us. Slowly, and at first by imitation, we acquire a language, until we are able to construct sentences by ourselves. In that process, two things are essential. The first is the community of fellow speakers, our family and then an ever-widening circle. The second is the particular tradition embodied in the language itself, its meanings and associations, divisions and connections, each of which has a history we unconsciously adopt as we learn to become articulate. The greater our mastery of the language, the more we are able to say what we feel and imagine what we might become. Without community and tradition, there is no self-expression beyond the inarticulate cry of a child.

The history of moral thought since Spinoza has been a progressive eclipse of community and tradition. That was once seen as a great liberation; but we can see it now as a great privation. Individualism condemns us to the task of constructing our own morality. But a private morality is no more possible than a private language. It is
not surprising that in the 20th century there have been philosophers, AJ Ayer among them, who argued that moral talk was mere emotion. The word ‘wrong’ was an inarticulate cry masquerading as speech. If so, far from reaching a state of sophistication, we have regressed to a moral childhood worse than that of which Spinoza and Freud accused religion. Moral education is not simply learning to make choices. It is becoming part of a community with a particular tradition, history and way of life. It is like learning a language. The contradiction at the heart of individualism is that there can be a self unencumbered by tradition, unfettered in its freedom. That is as inconceivable as an art without conventions or a thought without a language in which it can be expressed. The sovereign self, by dissolving its attachments, has become a kingdom without a country.

The Talmud tells the story of a man who came to the great sage Hillel and asked him to convert him to Judaism with one proviso: that he refused to accept rabbinic tradition. Hillel agreed and began by teaching him the Hebrew language. The next day he continued the lesson but this time he changed everything he had taught him the previous day. The man protested. ‘How can I learn if each day you teach me something different?’ ‘You see,’ said Hillel, ‘even to learn a language, you need to accept my authority as a teacher, and the traditions that give meanings to the words. How then can you learn Judaism without tradition and authority?’ That seems to me a parable for our time.

The problem of our moral ecology is that we have thought exclusively in terms of two domains: the state as an instrument of legislation and control, and the individual as the bearer of otherwise unlimited choices. But morality can no longer be predicated on the state, for we have become too diverse to allow a single morality to be legislated. Nor can it be located in the individual, for morality cannot be private in this way. We have neglected the third domain: that of community. But it is precisely as a member of a community that I learn a moral language, a vision and its way of life. I become articulate by acquiring a set of meanings not of my own invention, but part of a common heritage. I become connected to others through bonds of loyalty and obligation that are covenantal rather than contractual. And I become connected, too, to the community’s past and future, so that I can understand my life as a chapter in a larger narrative. That is what Jews, Christians and others do when they grow up within a religious tradition, and it is what Aristotle believed education was: induction into a community.

Morality and religion turn out to be connected after all. It is not that we need to be religious to be moral; but that we need to be part of a community. And it was Emil Durkheim who argued that this was the heart of the religious enterprise, that it provided the symbols that constituted communities and thus made possible pursuit of the common good. Modernity has been deeply destructive of communities, and yet such persisting sense as we have of a good beyond ourselves is probably due to their influence on us. Our religious traditions are an extraordinarily powerful moral resource. Not as a source of universal truth, because we live in a Babel of many truths. But at the fundamental level of creating communities built on a moral vision, and in educating us to collective pursuit of the good. Forming communities of meaning is religion’s peculiar power. And it is in communities that the moral enterprise begins.