THE NEW NATURALISM AND ETHICAL CONSENSUS

by Hazel E. Barnes

By the Grace of Guile: The Role of Deception in Natural History and Human Affairs. By LOYAL D. RUE. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1994. 306 pages. $27.50.

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Rarely, if ever, have I so intensely admired a book while finding myself in almost total disagreement with its author's avowed purpose and his own statement of what he has done. That this is possible is because one can read *By the Grace of Guile,* and give it a fair reading, in two quite different ways. Looking at it in the way that I myself prefer, Loyal Rue has accomplished something that I judge remarkable. Assuming that neither divinity, nor nature, nor philosophical logic has provided a sure foundation for a universally valid ethics, he has accepted the challenge to formulate what I will call a provisional ethics, a general outline for an ethical position which pragmatically, and in terms of its inner coherence, seems best adapted to a sensitive appreciation of our human existential condition and our situation in a world about which scientists have come to possess an impressive degree of understanding—if not yet, and perhaps never, absolute and complete knowledge. In short, without claiming to have said the last word, Rue structures a moral framework which he believes to be appropriate for us here and now and perhaps for a long time to come. I will return to the question of the nature of his conclusions on morality, a term he prefers rather than ethics. The project itself is exemplary. He is one of a very few persons to recognize that, given the lack of any general acceptance of traditional values, we need collectively to create an ethics or

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value system our society is willing to live by; and he offers, with due modesty, a possible model.

What I have said is, I think, a just appraisal of *By the Grace of Guile.* Possibly Rue himself would be willing to accept it as such, or at least as a partial summation of what he has done. It is not at all what he has declared to be his intention, and he might point out that my view of his book leaves out large sections of it or dismisses them as irrelevant. He would be right; precisely here arises disagreement with respect both to Rue's point of departure and to his end.

On the first page Rue announces that he accepts the truth of what he defines as nihilism.

> The universe is blind and aimless, it has no value in and of itself, it is unenchanted by forces or qualities or characteristics that might objectively endorse any particular human orientation toward it. The universe is dead and void of meaning. Its significance is not demonstrably one thing or another. The universe *just* is.

It is useless, Rue believes, to try to refute the nihilistic thesis, but he holds that it is maladaptive, not "conducive to human survival" (p. 276). Therefore, we as a species should combat it with a "Noble Lie," which will "re-enchant the universe by getting us to perceive, in spite of ourselves, that its significance is objective" (p. 279). Rue, who dubs himself "a theoretical nihilist and an existential biophiliac" (p. 278), holds that "adaptivity is more sublime than truth" (p. 279). We must deceive ourselves in order to preserve ourselves.

Let us look back now to Rue's starting point. Apart from the dubious assertion that the universe is "dead," an odd thing to say inasmuch as part of it is organic and all of it is describable in terms of particles of energy, Rue's summation is a fair description of secular naturalism, a position held not only by reductionist scientists but by many humanists. But is this thesis nihilistic? Rue says that it is; and because nihilism has always carried largely negative connotations, he easily concludes that it is maladaptive. Historically, nihilism has generally gone beyond the bare assertion that the universe as a whole does not exhibit what humans understand as purpose and meaning.[1] It has usually carried certain conclusions as consequent to this view; for example, the claim that no set of laws or institutions, or any kind of moral system, can be defended as better than another, *on any grounds.* Human life itself is nil; that is, of no value. Looked at in this light, nihilism is not the inevitable corollary of the belief that the universe "just is." For many persons, a view that frees us from supernaturalism is liberating. Philosophies as diverse as Dewey's pragmatism and humanistic existentialism have made such a view the basis for remaking the human world, which is the one

we live in, after all, in accordance with our brightest visions of a society designed, insofar as possible, to fulfill constructively the needs and aspirations of all of its members.

To be sure, it is not solely the apparent fact of the indifferent universe which prompts Rue to assume the truth of nihilism. Somewhat reluctantly persuaded by the arguments of postmodern deconstructionists, he has concluded that any theory—epistemological or ethical—reflects the social and personal situation of its proponent and is without objective foundation. In the most narrow sense this may be true, but Rue comes too close to accepting the idea that absolute relativism is the sole justifiable response. I am tempted here to take recourse in the argument of a former colleague of mine, Gardner Williams, who proposed what some of us disrespectfully called the "Ivory Soap theory of truth." In light of the well-established philosophical principle that the only thing for which we have absolute certainty is our immediate impression, Williams argued that there are many things for which we have practical—say, 99.44 percent pure—certainty. That is to say, all discourse, and indeed all action, is impossible if there is nothing which we can take as given. Rue might retort that such a commonsense point of view is appropriate for the practical sphere of everyday living but not applicable at the abstract level of moral theory. Still, he clearly wants to find a theoretical position that will enable us to adapt more satisfactorily to our worldly situation—in other words, not only to survive, but to live better. Let us grant the point that we can never arrive at a nonhuman point of view, or even at a universal consensus, which will guarantee the correctness of any theory as to how humans ought to behave. Is it therefore necessary, is it even helpful, to adopt a Noble Lie?

In support of his proposal, Rue offers the parallel of Plato's Noble Lie. I confess that in reading this I was shocked. In the *Republic,* Plato suggests that the elite rulers of his utopian state should deliberately propagate a lie to the effect that people are born from the earth and are constituted of different metals; that is, physically and mentally equipped to perform in only one of various fixed classes, a bit like Huxley's chemically determined residents in *Brave New World.* Rue would surely object vigorously to any hint that his Noble Lie is comparable to Plato's fascist propaganda.[2] Yet, despite his overt insistence that it is we ourselves, all of us, who should persuade ourselves to adopt what we know to be a lie, a suspicion of elitism lingers. The Noble Lie would be noble, among other things, because it is to be devised by the best-trained minds. One feels, without quite being able to document it, that Rue would be content with a world in which some took as true what others knew to be a convenient

fabrication. This charge may be unfair on my part. I willingly grant that Rue's declared goal is a society as democratically inclusive as is possible.

On the other hand, Rue certainly takes great pains to show that deception may be a good thing in itself. His historical survey of our Western tradition as based on the desire to avoid being deceived, either by others or by ourselves, differs from familiar portrayals of humankind's pursuit of truth at all cost only in Rue's emphasis on the failure of the endeavor and his omnipresent implication that perhaps deception is not intrinsically something that should be so greatly feared. He goes on to comment approvingly on the positive value of deception in biological evolution (protective mimicry, etc.) and then proceeds to show that some degree of deception has often been necessary for social cohesion and even for individual physical and mental health. That in some situations a lie is the lesser of two evils nobody could sensibly deny. But to use this as an argument to justify recourse to lying as intrinsically good, even in the best of situations is dubious. I much prefer, as an alternative, Albert Camus's notion of "calculated culpability," which he developed in *The Rebel.* In an imperfect and finite world, Camus argues, total innocence is impossible. But as we balance ways and means—in political action, for instance—we should not hide from ourselves that injury to a single person for the sake of the greater good remains in itself culpable—a negative factor that must be taken into account. To urge the knowing acceptance of untruth as our best response to our failure to find some sort of absolute, impersonal—in essence, nonhuman—truth is not only unwise but unnecessary.

Rue acknowledges that even though the nihilistic thesis is maladaptive, it has at least the virtue of getting rid of false myths. Does this admission imply that there might be true myths? I think Rue hedges a bit here. He maintains that religious faith is systematic self-deception. He insists that no philosophical or moral theory has objective support. On the other hand, he explicitly specifies that whatever we believe and accept as guides for behavior should not be at variance with what the most up-to-date science takes to be the best description of the nature and function of the physical universe. Poltergeists, the earth goddess, Noah's ark, and the story of the loaves and fishes would presumably all be outside the pale. So is a creationism which contradicts the general theory of evolution. For Rue, the value of a myth or of a Noble Lie is measured by how well it conforms to the findings of the "new naturalism"—that is, to what natural and social sciences tell us about the nature of physical reality and of human reality.

Evidently Rue holds that myth and the Noble Lie function legitimately only in contexts where the testing of a hypothesis is not possible. This admittedly leaves a wide field. I agree that for many areas of our lives, perhaps in the most important ones, we must of necessity act in accordance with beliefs for which there can be neither guarantee nor universal agreement. (For that matter, history has shown us that universality is itself no guarantee.) But rather than attempt the tour de force of arguing that we should adopt a lie in order to "re-enchant the earth and save us from the truth" (p. 306), I think Rue might better have worked more positively in terms already suggested by the early pragmatists and by existentialists.

William James pointed out that the most interesting thing about a person is his/her "overbeliefs" concerning matters which cannot be proved one way or the other. We cherish overbeliefs—that is, we assume as the background of our decisions, convictions, or hypotheses, such as our freedom to control our own characters, the potentiality for the infinite improvement of human society, the possibility of our discovering new dimensions of consciousness and hitherto incomprehensible facts about the universe itself. Add to this John Dewey's central thesis, in *A Common Faith,* that belief in the eventual realization of an imaginary ideal is the first necessary step toward making it a reality, and we seem to have made considerable progress against a maladaptive nihilism without invoking deception. Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre start with the premise that values are created by humans, not revealed, and that as meaning-seeking beings we individually and collectively impose meanings on this impersonal universe. Rue complains that the inscribed meanings conflict, that there will be many stories of our interactions with the surrounding world, but never one story which is everybody's. Yet he himself provides the outline for a proper response to this situation, quite apart from his device of a lie. We must seek, he says, to establish a framework which will protect the pluralism and at the same time search for a story or overarching project that will become more inclusive, one in which all may find the incentive to play a part. This is the thrust of his effort to lay down one possibly acceptable morality, culminating in what he titles "a federation of meaning." The conviction that it can be done and is worth doing is the positive message of the Noble Lie. But since he offers his principles and program simply as proposals which he thinks will best serve us as a species, why does he feel the need to argue that all of this is a lie?

I cannot do justice here to Rue's positive program for human betterment. It is perhaps less remarkable for its originality than for its internal logic and for its firm anchor in, and consistency with,

what Rue takes to be the best scientific knowledge we have of nature, of human biology, psychology, and sociology. Biocentrism is the basis of his theory. Rue holds life itself and biological diversity as givens upon which to build. Respect for other species is a corollary. Rue does not assume that the human species is justified in exploiting the rest of living beings to its own interest. But with this proviso he, quite appropriately in my opinion, is concerned primarily with how best we humans can live, developing and at the same time protecting the resources of our planet. (His biocentrism would, I think, be receptive to considerations for extraterrestrial life forms if need should arise, something which cannot be said of most anthropocentric positions.) Rue links his societal recommendations with his psychological analysis by showing how the basic individual motivations of curiosity—or cognition, pleasure/pain, and self-esteem—should be reflected in the public attitude and policy with regard to knowledge systems (including cosmological speculations), distributions of economic resources and opportunities, and moral/legal expectations. He effectively argues that "social animals will tend toward the maintenance of confluences of interests among group members" and that "the most excellent moral values are those which most effectively expand confluences of self-interest among members of a group" (p. 299).

Perhaps the most distinctive aspect of Rue's proposals is his impassioned plea for the adoption of a global mentality. Here he goes beyond the usual wishful thinking and pious hopes, declaring openly that some form of world federalism and world government is the only acceptable political solution and that it is imperative that we struggle to rid ourselves of our present commitment to the idea of national sovereignty as final authority. Most states today, Rue claims, are too large to cope with local problems, too small to solve global ones. Recognizing that world government will inevitably usher in new perils and difficulties, he urges that we must nevertheless move toward it and that many factors today make this a moment of favorable opportunity, a *kairos*. Consensus and tolerance of divergent perspectives, he urges, are essential, both in the struggle and in the goal.

Despite his effort to avoid tribalism, Rue is well aware that his point of view remains that of a Western, democratic intellectual. He tries to offset this limitation by stressing that we as Westerners must keep ourselves open to other voices, and he is anxious to build in room for perpetual self-correction. Yet a certain tension abides. On the one hand, he urges that we must move collectively toward a unified global cosmology and a shared structure of meaning and

morality. He wants this to be such that it will be to the interest of all the world's people to adopt it and to find within it the maximum of freedom in pursuing their individual self-fulfillment in diverse ways. At the same time, he insists that all cultures must find ways to accommodate themselves to the specific supposed truths of the new naturalism—all but its nihilistic conclusion. To ensure such an outcome, Rue goes so far as to say that scientists must be constantly consulted to guarantee that our cosmological outlook is up to date, and he advocates that teachers serve as "thought police," an unfortunate term, perhaps deriving from Rue's overreverence for Plato. I do not find fault with this seeming contradiction. It is inevitable. Moreover, it can be rendered tolerable if Rue is willing simply to offer his suggested morality as a hypothetical model: *If* we accept the outlook of the new naturalism as the closest to a true picture of reality that we have so far achieved, *then* here is an ethical position and a broad outline for a program of action that are appropriate to it. The world's leaders could do much worse than to accept Rue's invitation to think further along the lines he lays down.

NOTES

1. The *American College Dictionary* does give as one definition of *nihilism* "a belief that there is no objective basis of truth." It seems evident to me that Rue has gone beyond this restricted denotation.

2. To be fair, I should say that Rue does not say that he approves of the contents of Plato's Noble Lie. But I find it strange to try to justify the methodological use of a lie by so heinous an example.