

Abstract: Scepticism, Pessimism, Mitigation: The Amoralist in the 1950s

This paper emerges from my ongoing research on analytic philosophy in Britain in the 1950s. I shall be developing a general schema for thinking about mid-century responses to the old philosophical problem of the amoralist (roughly, someone who denies that the interests of others ground reasons for one's acting). The conceptual and psychological possibility of the amoralist have been thought to raise grave problems for the objectivity and authority of morality, just as analogous forms of scepticism have been thought to raise difficulties in other areas of philosophy (epistemology, logic). I shall be reconstructing texts from five philosophers writing in this period who, beginning from different assumptions, independently reach variants on the view that (1) rational argument may well have no ultimate purchase on the amoralist ('Pessimism'), and (2) morality is only somewhat the worse for it ('Mitigation'). I am not aiming at an arbitration of the debate but a clear statement – a 'perspicuous representation' – of what was, and remains, at stake in it. I shall be claiming that some of the lessons of this debate can be generalised to anti-sceptical strategies in other areas of philosophy. There will also be anecdotes.