

Meta-Moralism

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I

In thinking about morality, if we do it as more than a kind of intellectual exercise, we are doing it to try to make sense of our tangled lives, to orient ourselves in the world and to come to have some understanding of what a decent social order would look like and how to achieve it. The philosophical study of morality has a significant underlying rationale just to the extent that it is importantly instrumental in those tasks. Its supreme goal is to articulate in some tolerably systematic form a conception of the moral order of things which will in some reasonable way be authoritative and survive the critical scrutiny of reflective and informed persons.

The rub is that there is a pervasive conviction that this is an impossible enterprise, that this is a task that neither philosophy nor anything else can meet. And indeed, some will feel it is something which isn't even within philosophy's purview.

There will not be a few who will believe that the very notion of such an authoritative basis for moral claims is a Holmes-less Watson. We indeed have tangled lives and we would like to orient ourselves in the world and, given the gross injustice and absurdity of much that goes on around us, we would very much like to attain such a rational and authoritative

overview of moral phenomena. But 'likes will make fine pets of us' is such a hankering for such an overview. It is widely believed that it is wishful thinking.

What would it be like to have an *authoritative* overview in the domain of morality? Well, some philosophers might have a much better account of moral notions than many other people—including many intellectuals. The representations of such philosophers of how moral notions hang together might indeed be authoritative or, more accurately, be much more perspicuous than that of others. But it is crucial to note that it is in the display of moral concepts where a philosopher might clearly in a still challengeable way be authoritative. Perspicuous representation is one thing, authoritative ascertain is another. The idea of it being *authoritative vis-à-vis* the truth of moral claims or the soundness of moral arguments is not a pellucid one. In virtue of what would a philosopher's account or anyone else's be authoritative and what are the marks, if any, of an authoritative moral overview?

We can speak of an authoritative statement on the value health-wise of regular jogging. Certain people can be authorities here and can speak authoritatively on such a question. A group of people, none of them M.D.s and none of them particularly knowledgeable about human biology or health research, might get into a dispute about the wisdom of jogging. Some might maintain it was very good for one's own health. It helps one get rid of excess fat and it is good for the lungs and heart. Others might respond that people who have lived a sedentary life and who have considerable cholesterol accumulation ought not to take up jogging even if they go about it gradually and sensibly, for it puts too much strain on the heart of such a person. The dispute might go on endlessly and inconclusively, given the knowledge of the disputants. But, even if in fact one is not available for them, we know perfectly well what it would be like to get an authoritative answer here. An M.D. with

the proper statistics, a good knowledge of the functioning of the heart and the effects on human beings of jogging could give such an authoritative answer. This does not mean that it would be an infallible answer but it could be, given that he had the requisite knowledge and experience, an authoritative answer.

Could a fundamental moral issue have such 'requisite knowledge' and have such an authoritative answer? That there could be seems very problematical. But is this a too diversionist response? It would be good to consider a case. Suppose a man, married for a second time, finds himself in an intolerable domestic situation. His adolescent son by his first marriage and his second wife are in constant bitter and very destructive strife. He can see that there is much to be said on both sides, nearly equal fault or defects on either side and, given the personalities involved, little hope to rationally resolve the strife or even the tension. Should he take sides in the dispute? Should he send his son to a boarding school? Should he separate from his wife? Should he just live with the strife and tension doing nothing in resignation? What should he do? He is, let us hypothesize, resolved not to treat anyone as a means only. But what does this come to here? What would an authoritative answer look like based on 'adequate knowledge'?

Well, perhaps we are not, after all, so far off from our first non-moral case in which we could get an authoritative answer. There are marriage counsellors and people in family counselling services who have some knowledge and some experience in such matters and can give some answers.

Perhaps the first reaction to such a remark is to express a thorough skepticism over whether such people do really have the requisite expertise—the actual knowledge—to make such value judgments in any hard-headed, knowledgeable and objective way. Given the state

of development of psychology and sociology, its applications, its forms of engineering, they could hardly be a fertile source of information. It is perhaps, indeed very perhaps, wishful thinking to believe that its practitioners will have anything like a scientific and objective understanding of what they are about.

However, even if we do not demur at this very low estimate of the social sciences and/or the art of counselling, it is perhaps not unreasonable to remind ourselves that experienced and sensitive marriage counsellors have been over such stress situations again and again; they have seen family after family in such conditions of stress. If they are reflective and concerned human beings they will, out of their extensive experience, surely be in a better position to give advice or at least to understand the situation than most of us, including the conflicting agents themselves.

There still—or so it is usually thought—is a difference between this case and the jogging case. What we are tempted to say is this: what the man must do vis-à-vis his wife and son is distinctively a *moral* problem in the way the jogging case is not and a moral problem. At least not so unequivocally and clearly. Moreover, it is what Wittgenstein would call a grammatical remark to say that each person must make his or her own moral decisions and that no one else can make such decisions for them. Still, there is no impersonal, authoritative 'moral truth', it will sometimes be claimed, which can tell a person what they must do. But, whatever may be so for the moral case, this is surely not true concerning what each person would say concerning what was or wasn't good for their health. Quite apart from any decisions I would make or commitments I would undertake, it could just be the case that jogging would not be good for me. That could be authoritatively settled, though I would certainly not say this 'authoritative settlement' yields certainty. But in *some* cases like

this one it is near certainty what the answer is, but not in the moral example or indeed in most moral examples. There could be people in the jogging case who were in a position to know this such that their pronouncements on it would just be something one would be very unwise not to follow, if we cared for our health and if we at all aspired to be rational or objective. If your doctor advises you to give up something, normally you should if you can. But people can go on smoking though they very well know that it is dangerous for them. There can be an authoritative statement both in the jogging case and the smoking case. But there is, as I remarked above, a reluctance to make such jogging-like claims about clear moral cases. Yet sometimes we get close to this. A reasonable person in the husband's situation, caught in the snarl of conflict between his wife and son, would surely do well to listen to the advice of reflective and humane people who have been in one way or another over that kind of road before. But retaining his moral authority, we want to say, he would still have to make up his mind what he is to do. It is not the case that there is some information, some empirical facts accessible to anyone who will make the effort, which are such that we can determine on the basis of them just what should be done such that, if a person is rational and reasonable, they will do just that.

II

Now, however, the worm begins to turn and we should begin to be less confident in what we are to say here. Well known philosophical and sometimes religious difficulties hove into sight and many people at this juncture are more likely to strike problematic postures. To insist on some sort of principled difference between the two cases is, it may be thought, to assume that in the moral case we cannot derive an ought from an is. But such an

assumption is indeed problematical. Moreover, is/ought questions apart, is there really such a sharp difference between the two cases? As Hilary Putnam has shown, we should distinguish a fact/value distinction from a fact/value dichotomy (Putnam 2002). Many moral remarks are inextricably factual and moral. ('He is intolerant', for example. That surely is not empirical fact-insensitive. Many moral remarks are like that.) Do they not really differ in degree rather than kind? It is not true that the moral case is radically different from the non-moral case. We are skeptical of authoritative answers for the moral case but can we rule out moral authoritativeness in principle or on some secure theoretic grounds? There is an old and strong tradition in moral philosophy that will assert that we can. Indeed, even Wittgenstein, who was hardly a moral skeptic, in a brilliantly succinct way argued that there is a difference in kind here. And even Putnam did not deny it. Moreover, there remains the consideration that no one can make another person's moral decisions for him. (And, even if that is a grammatical remark, it still is a significant one. It is not a banality as most grammatical remarks are when they are understood as such.)

Let us look at the reasoning that would support the claim that there must be a difference in kind between the moral case and the non-moral case. In doing this I shall, for the present, put the is/out distinction aside. 'Jogging is good for you for it helps keep you in shape' is thought to be quite different from 'Keeping your son with you is the right thing to do for sending him to boarding school under such circumstances is to give him a sense that you don't really care for him and that he is just in the way'. Whether jogging helps keep you in shape is plainly a question of empirical fact and if it helps keep you in shape, it is also true that, to that extent, it is good for you. It makes no sense to argue 'Jogging helps keep you in shape but it is in no way good for you'. This is not to say, of course, that jogging might not

have other side effects such that, all told, notwithstanding that though it helps keep you in shape, it would not be good for you, though that this is so would again be a question of fact that could in principle at least be settled authoritatively. But to the extent that jogging helps keep you in shape, then, other things being equal, it follows that jogging is good for you. If (to generalize) something helps keep you in shape and doesn't harm you in any other way, it follows that it is good for you, i.e., good for your health.

Can anything like that, after all, be said for the moral case? Consider 'To give your son the feeling that you do not care for him is just, taken by itself, wrong'. The 'taken by itself' serves as a reminder that circumstances could conceivably arise in which, everything considered, you should reluctantly accept that, everything considered, this is the least bad thing to do. But in this respect it is on a footing with 'To fail to exercise is just something which in itself is bad for you'. It is an empirical question whether sending him to boarding school under such circumstances will make or contribute toward making him believe that you really do not care for him. It is also an empirical question whether you do or do not give him the feeling that you care for him. That that gives his son the feeling he does not care for him is a matter of fact claim and, if this matter of fact actually obtains, it follows that everything else being equal, something has been done which, if he could have avoided it, he ought not to do. Decision isn't king here anymore than in the jogging case. Whatever the son's father would decide to do or choose to do or voluntarily commit himself to do, it still follows that it could not be the case that, just like that, without very special excusing circumstances, that it was morally permissible for him to do it if he could have prevented it without causing greater harm to give his son such a feeling. There are circumstances in which it could, everything considered, be the right thing to do but they would have to be

special circumstances. We are making remarks here but none of them are empirical fact insensitive, though matters may be so that they are nearly so.

It is not unnatural to respond that to say this is not to make a conceptual remark but to give voice to a very fundamental moral conviction. It is not to say something which is built into the very logic of our language. Someone who denied the above would be saying something *morally* deviant: that is to say, he would be saying something which marked a departure from what, at least in our culture, is a *moral* regularity but he would not be saying something *linguistically* deviant, something which marked a departure from a linguistic regularity. Moreover, what he says is not conceptually problematic either.

It is true that at least most of us would balk at 'My son has done nothing untoward but there is nothing wrong at all about my giving him the feeling that I don't care for him'. But we balk at certain kinds of obscenities coming from certain people as well and we would balk at 'Peanut butter and jelly sandwiches are awful' in the middle of an article in a geological journal. There is balking and balking, and we do not balk in any of the above contexts because we do not understand. We sometimes balk because we understand all too well.

Given our own moral commitments, the normal ones in our culture, we do not see how anyone with an ounce of moral feeling or sense could so regard his son. And, of course, he could not so regard him where he is committed to a moral point of view that reflected our traditions and commitments. 'Son' indeed is itself immersed in a moral framework. To speak of someone as 'my son' is in our culture to give to understand that I have certain commitments to him and these commitments, though defeasible, are part of our way, encapsulated in our moral practices, of relating to him. But we could understand someone

with a radically different set of moral commitments—indeed in a very different moral tradition—who did not have such a regard for his son. (Anouilh’s Henry the Second, for example.) ‘Moral’ has a contrast with both ‘immoral’ and ‘non-moral’. The former contrast makes us reluctant to speak of someone’s views being moral views when we take them to be anathema or even when we strongly disapprove of them. But when we think about it in a cool moment and remember that ‘moral’ also contrasts with ‘non-moral’ as well as ‘immoral’, we will acknowledge that an ‘immoral morality’ is not necessarily a conceptual anomaly. We can understand someone who showed such indifference to his son even if he did not give us a story about his son’s depravity, bestiality, genuine cruelty or longstanding and unjustified indifference even to the other members of his own family. We would understand a man who just had no concern for the feelings of his children, though we would regard him as not only morally reprehensible but also as morally odd, though not conceptually untoward. Beyond keeping people disciplined and in relatively good working order, we *might* be quite indifferent to them, reserving his feelings of concern for people whom we regard as our peers. That this, as we would avow, is a monstrous moral view does not make it a non-moral view. ‘To give your son the feeling that you do not care for him is just wrong’ is not a grammatical remark or a truism from all moral perspectives, though I is from ours. (This is so even when ‘wrong’ is understood, as it should be here, as *prima facie* wrong’.) To tie this to the world, think of the Incan, Aztec or Comanche moral orders. Certain very major element of these moral orders, but not all, make us take them to be monstrous orders now, but moral orders all the same. But not all who were committed to that order would coherently say it was a monstrous moral order. That is unsettling for us.

Does this establish that 'moral' and the like are so open-textured that it means that, as far as 'the logic of our language' is concerned, we are free to choose our moral principles so that anything we would choose to do in a principled way (that is, be prepared to universalize) is a moral principle of ours no matter what its content? To draw this conclusion would be to move too fast and too far from what has been said above. That we can readily conceive of a man who has no such regard for his son and still has a mastery of moral concepts and *a* moral point of view does not show or even tend to show that anything a person decided on and was prepared to universalize and indeed hold onto – no matter what, even though it had not connected with what he took to be human harm or wellbeing – would be regarded as or even understood as a moral stance of his. If I say 'Always pull your ear twice and stick out your tongue before going out on the veranda' and consistently act on it and would not abandon it even though forcefully urged to, and that I universalize it, steadfastly urging others to do likewise, you could rightly say that I had a thing about it (a blick, if you will) but it could not safely be called a 'moral view' of mine or a 'moral principle of conduct'. Being universalizable is necessary but not sufficient for it to be a moral principle. The mark of the moral seems always to be linked with some content—perhaps (as common sense would seem to sanction) with human harm and wellbeing. It is not marked by just what we would decide on principle to do or what policies we would engage in or what we would subscribe to no matter what their content. And not all commitments are moral commitments. Moral commitments are not of such a lean content. Such decisionalism is off the mark and arguably even unintelligible or incoherent.

III

We can conclude from this that by this line of investigation we have not uncovered a difference between the jogging case and the moral case that is of any particular significance. What can count as an intelligible valuation in their respective domains is tied to a determinate content, though in the jogging case it appears to have a more determinate content; a scientific content that moral commitments do not necessarily have. However, even this may, after all, give us a clue as to why it may still be true that there can be authoritative views concerning jogging and health care while there neither are nor can be such authoritative views concerning the morality of personal relations or community relations. In the latter cases, while it is not just a matter of choosing without guides or finally just having to commit yourself, it still is the case that the criteria of choice are more complex and more contested and indeed contestable than in the jogging case or even the smoking case. There is not the same settled 'agreement in judgment' in the moral cases as there is in the jogging case or the smoking case. Things still do not run so smoothly in the moral case. But recognizing this we have something here that does not establish a difference in kind but a difference in degree. And in seeing that we have only a difference in degree, we have lost a secure ground for saying that there cannot possibly be any authoritative basis for moral claims as there can be for such jogging claims or jogging-type determinate health claims. Yet our conviction, or at least lingering suspicion, that there must be some such difference is a strong one and a persistent one. But perhaps all the same it rests on an illusion. But we should be reluctant about speaking of 'a scientific morality'.

One way to try to locate a difference in kind is to make the following stress: if you see me swimming and notice that I swim badly, you might say, 'You swim badly. That's no way to do either the breast stroke or the Australian crawl!' Assuming I swim well enough so that my drowning is not in question, I could reply, without any kind of impropriety, 'I don't care. I don't want to learn to swim any better!' In such a case, as in the health case, if no moral considerations intervene, specifying what I really want has a very special weight and, to put it minimally, is plainly relevant concerning answers to such questions about what to do. This is so even for the case about smoking. Now suppose in contrast as a result of my frustrations I was behaving cruelly and unfairly to my son and you call me up short by saying, 'You're being cruel to him and grossly unfair'. If, parallel to the case above, I reply, 'I don't care. I don't want to be fair or decent either', I have said something which is not only morally unhappy, it is conceptually unhappy as well. This 'answer' is conceptually unhappy because (though I do not say only because) it is plainly irrelevant. You can readily point out to me that it doesn't matter what I want, I have no business treating him in that way. I just ought to want to be fair and decent and to be so if I can. If I do not have such desires that is a very strong count against me indeed, namely that of plain moral indifference. This is very different from 'If you want to swim well, swim this way' or 'If you want to keep in shape, jog'. I could relevantly not care about swimming well or keeping in shape. Being indifferent to moral considerations is not a matter of legitimate choice. The stringently and most paradigmatically moral cases do not take, as peculiarly decisive in reasoning about what to do, an uncovering of what you want or even want on careful reflection. In such cases we—or at least many of us—are perfectly willing to make claims which are taken to be quite thoroughly almost categorically binding. They tell someone *what they ought to want*

whether they want it or not. That is what everyone ought to want. Wanting or not wanting morally speaking enters into it. This is just how the moral conceptual practice goes. There is no room for moral choice here. This is just the way our language-game is played. If we are to be moral that is what we must do. And we cannot legitimately just choose to be moral, though some few will not choose to be so. This, to be paradigmatic, is evident in the case of deliberately treating one's son cruelly and unfairly. How the husband should act, caught as he is in the conflict between son and stepmother, is another matter. It is less evident in the latter case what actually ought to be done. The actual rights and wrongs are in doubt. It is not, that is, clear what ought to be done; the actual rights and wrongs are in some doubt. But if it ever does become evident what the husband morally speaking should do and if it turns out that that is not what he wants to do, that will not alter the fact that he ought to do it, his wants to the contrary notwithstanding. His not wanting to do it is not even remotely relevant in such a situation as a justification for not doing it or as a background assumption where justification in morality properly comes to an end. That he has been treating his son cruelly just is a matter of treating him badly. Moral discourse just does not allow this as arithmetical discourse does not allow 'two plus two makes five'. And even if 'cruelty is bad' is a kind of quasi-tautology, morally it does not sanction being cruel. He cannot simply here legitimately do what he wants. What he wants to do is simply irrelevant in such a situation while, by contrast, what he wants to do in non-moral cases I have mentioned is discursively relevant. There are a range of very stringent, very central and typically moral considerations that do not turn on ascertaining what the agent really wants or indeed really would want on reflection when adequately informed. It does not turn on what his pro and con attitudes are. Not infrequently what he must do has nothing to do with what he wants to do. His may

sound like a puritanical view of mine. It has nothing to do with that but has to do with the logic of moral discourse.

Here is the essential, or at least an essential, difference between on the one hand moral cases, or at least a central range of moral cases, and on the other hand non-moral cases. But now the question of authority and questions about the very possibility of authoritative moral claims returns like the repressed. There seem at least to be two jarring tendencies. On the one hand we (or many of us) do make moral judgments about what people (including ourselves) ought to want. But on the other hand we also feel in such circumstances that there can be no authority telling us what to want, morally speaking. There can be no telling us, *authoritatively* speaking, what we ought to want as distinct from telling us what to do or avoid doing. There can, however, be an *authoritative* advice giving about how best to attain what you want. But not telling you what to want. Is this thinking an unwitting liberal bias or (what is not the same thing) a fundamental conviction which is not in type co-extensive with the whole range of either actual or conceivable moral responses or (what again is not the same thing either) rational moral responses? Or is this something which is built into the very 'logic of moral reasoning'? Is an *authoritative* view concerning what is to be done morally some sort of conceptual or logical impossibility?

Let us return to the point where started: what, vis-à-vis the truth of moral claims, would it be like to attain an authoritative moral view? When if ever, could even people who are fully informed about how moral concepts work be justified in asserting that, quite independently of what the attitudes and convictions of the agents were, certain moral claims are true and certain moral claims are false? What would it be like to establish that a whole moral orientation was sound or for that matter unsound? What would it be like to give sound

moral arguments and to organize them in a systematic and rational way into a moral overview which would form a comprehensive guide for human living and contain fundamental moral principles which are true *not* only if someone who is justified in accepting a certain moral system and, takes a certain moral stance commits himself/herself in a certain way, plays a certain moral language-game, lives in a certain way, or lives in a certain tribe, but because certain fundamental principles are true or false *überhaupt*? Denials that there can be authoritative *and* rational moralities or moral claims rest on a skepticism that anything like this can obtain. Indeed skepticism over morality often rests on such a belief. Is such a skepticism justified? I do not think that we can justifiably take the short way with moral skeptics, popular in many philosophical circles until very recently, where skepticism is diffused by means of the claim that it represents nothing which could be coherently stated, let alone convincingly argued. Morality sometimes makes very demanding claims and it is very understandable that we should seek authoritative answers.

However, what is not evident is whether we can have them. Can we correctly say that such authoritativeness is built into the moral point of view? If we look at moral phenomena worldwide and over time we will find that there are moral points of view but that there is no such thing as *the* moral point of view with the authoritativeness that many moral philosophers and many others have sought. That is a philosopher's dream.

IV

Perhaps I have made too sharp a distinction about authority in the two cases of the MD's advice about jogging and the family counsellor's advice about a family situation. We need to pay more attention to what authoritativeness comes to. The authoritativeness of the

doctor's claim that 'Jogging is good for you' is reliable, indeed highly so, in the abstract, but only generally or for a considerable part for any actual individual. The extensive differences in concrete between individuals makes the authoritativeness of the claim less determinate. What should be done will vary indefinitely with specific cases but a good experienced doctor will have an authority of a somewhat different kind: an authority that is less scientifically rooted resulting in part from his familiarity with the individuals he is advising and with their individual physical and psychological distinctiveness. In giving his advice, the doctor will be attuned to that but he will also be informed by the general scientific knowledge he has of the standard effects of jogging. But his advice, if given properly, is not just rooted in such general scientific knowledge but as well on his knowledge of the particularities of the person or persons he is advising. Something that is less scientifically rooted than general knowledge about the dangers and advantages of jogging. This particular knowledge of a person, however, is not *unscientific* knowledge but is less scientifically rooted than the abstract generalizations which may very well apply only *prima facie* to an individual jogger or potential jogger. What the doctor would say to an obese person or to a person with defective legs or with a developed cancer may very well be different, sometimes very different, from what he would say to a normally situated person in the prime of life. It would be absurd and irresponsible of a doctor to tell a 90 year old that jogging is good for him, perhaps even criminally irresponsible. The authority that a doctor has is much more contextual and is more variable from individual to individual and more like that of a family counsellor than I have hitherto acknowledged—and less scientific. But a family counsellor's practice is also more like, though not identical to, some aspects of a medical doctor's practice than I have acknowledged. The differences are more of a *degree* than of *kind*. Family counselling may

well have fewer reliable general principles to appeal to when counsellors seek to resolve problems for their patients or clients than obtains for a medical doctor in giving advice to a jogger or prospective jogger. Still, the family counsellor has some reasonably reliable generalizations to go on, though not to the extent the doctor has. But their practices are more alike than I have given to understand. Both practices are in large part practices of art and have the contextual indefiniteness of such practices. We have differences of degree here rather than of kind. Still, the M.D. has more secure science to rely on, though even with the M.D. not rigidly so than that of the family counsellor. Moral practices are generally more like those of the counsellor's than the M.D.'s. Philosophers from time immemorial have wanted their moral practices to be more like the M.D.'s. But that is illusory. It is also an error to think the M.D.'s authority is different in kind rather than degree from the counsellor's. Still, trying to locate more accurately the precise differences in degree, if we can, is hardly a worthwhile project. In carrying out their practices and in making decisions, neither the doctor nor the counsellor need worry their heads about that question or perhaps putative question of whether it has a scientific side. But some theoreticians, including philosophers, might. But neither a doctor's reliable counselling nor a family counsellor's reliable counselling rests on answering questions about fundamental scientificity any more than mathematics totters if we have not answered meta-mathematical questions about the relative merits of logicism, formalism and intuitionism. Most in meta-moralism is as bad as moralism. It is too often like an engine idling.