

## On Being Morally Authoritative

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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 own tangled lives, to orient ourselves in the world and to come to have some understanding of what a decent social order would look like. The philosophical study of morality has a significant underlying rationale just to the extent that it is importantly instrumental in that task. Its supreme goal is to articulate in some tolerably systematic form a conception of the moral order of things which will be authoritative and survive the critical scrutiny of reflective men.

The rub is that there is a widespread conviction that this is an impossible enterprise, that this is a task that philosophy cannot meet. And indeed, some will feel, it is something which isn't even within its purview.

The conviction is widespread that the very notion of such an authoritative basis for moral claims is a Holmesless 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'—such a hankering for such an overview is, we suspect, wishful thinking.

What would it be like to have an *authoritative* overview in the domain of morality? Well, some philosopher might have a much better account of moral notions than other people—including many philosophers. His representation of how moral notions hang together might indeed be authoritative—be much more perspicuous than that of others. But it is crucial to note that it is in the display of moral concepts where his account can perhaps be authoritative. But, by contrast, 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 here be authoritative and what are the marks of an authoritative overview?

We can speak without any conceptual puzzlement of an authoritative statement on the value, healthwise, 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 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. The dispute might go on endlessly and inconclusively, given the knowledge of the disputants. But 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 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 there, for a fundamental moral issue, be such 'requisite knowledge' and such an authoritative answer? That there could be seems very problematical. But is this a too Protestant response? It would be good to consider a case. Suppose a man, remarried for a second time, finds himself in an intolerable domestic situation. His adolescent son by his first marriage and his second wife are at constant, bitter and indeed very destructive odds. 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 rationally to resolve the tension. Should he take sides in the dispute, should he send his son to a boarding school? Should he separate from his wife? 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, based on 'adequate knowledge', look like?

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.

Perhaps the most common first reaction to such a remark is a thorough scepticism over whether such people do really have the requisite expertise, the actual knowledge, to make in any hard-headed and objective way such judgments. Given the state of development of psychology and sociology, its applications—its form of engineering—could hardly be a fertile source of information; it is 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 wise and concerned human beings they will, out of extensive experience, surely be in a better position to give advice or at least to understand the situation than will most of us.

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 sons is distinctly a *moral* problem in the way the jogging case is not and a moral problem is such that it is 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.

However, and by contrast, this is surely not true concerning what each person would say concerning what was or wasn't good for her health. Quite apart from any decisions I would make or commitments I would undertake or predilections I would have, it could just be the case that jogging would not be good for me. There could be people who were in a position to know this such that their pronouncements on it would just be something I would just have to follow, if I at all aspired to be rational or objective. But there is a not inconsiderable reluctance to say this about the moral case. A reasonable man caught in the husband's situation in the snarl of conflict between his wife and son would surely do well to listen to the advice of wise and humane people who had been over that road before, but he would still, we want to say, have to make up his own mind what he is to do. It appears, at least, not to be the case that there is some information, some cluster of empirical facts, accessible to anyone who will make the effort, which will enable him to determine on the basis of them just what he should do, such that, if he is rational and objective, he will do that.

Now, however, the worm begins to turn and we should begin to be less confident in what we are to say. Well-known philosophical difficulties loom into sight and people, at this juncture, are more likely to strike problematic philosophical 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 one 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? Do they not really differ in degree rather than kind? That is to say, is it not true that the moral case is only different in being more complex? We are sceptical about authoritative answers for the moral cases but can we justifiably rule them out on principle or on some secure theoretic grounds? There is a strong tradition in moral philosophy that will assert that we can. Wittgenstein supported that tradition when he argued in a brilliantly succinct way that there is a principled difference here. Moreover, there remains the consideration that no one can make another man's moral decisions for him.

## II

Let us look at the reasoning that would support the claim that there must be a principled difference between the moral case and the non-moral case. In doing this, I shall, for the present, put is/ought arguments 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. Moreover, 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 'Z 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 it helps keep you in shape, that 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 jogging helps keep you in shape, then, everything else 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 allow that to happen. This means that you know that the results of your actions would be such that your son would come to have such feelings. But in this respect it is on a footing with 'To fail to exercise is just something which in itself is bad for you'. Now it is an empirical question whether you do or do not care for your son and it is a further empirical question whether you do or do not give him the feeling that you care for him. That y gives his son the feeling he does not care for him is a matter of fact consideration and, if this matter of fact actually obtains, it follows that, everything else being equal, y has done something he ought not to do. Decision isn't king here any more than in the jogging case, though it does seem to be moral criteria, criteria where decisions could enter as an integral element, which govern whether everything else is equal. Whatever y would decide to do or choose to do or voluntarily commit himself to doing, it still follows, where y lives in a social structure like ours, that it could not be the case that, just like that, without very special excusing circumstances, that it is morally permissible for him, if he can prevent it, to give his son such a feeling.

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 of ours. It is not to say something which is built into the very logic of our language. Someone who denied the claim made in the paragraph before this one would be saying something *morally* deviant: that is to say, he would be saying something which marked a departure from 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 balk because we understand.

Given our own moral commitments, we do not see how anyone in a culture such as ours with an ounce of moral feeling could so regard his son. And, of course, he could not so regard him in anything like a moral

view that reflected our traditions and commitments. 'Son' indeed is itself immersed in a moral framework. To speak of someone as 'my son' is to give to understand that I have certain commitments to him and these commitments, though defeasible, are part of our way 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' carries 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 views we strongly disapprove of. But when we think about it in a cool moment and remember that 'moral' also contrasts with 'non-moral', we will acknowledge that an 'immoral morality' is not a conceptual anomaly. We could 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 long standing and unjustified indifference to the other members of his family. We would understand a man who just had no concern for the feelings of his children. Beyond keeping them disciplined and in relatively good working order, he might be quite indifferent to them, reserving his feelings of concern for people who are his 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, taken by itself, is just wrong' is not a grammatical remark or a truism from all moral perspectives.

### III

Does this establish that 'moral' and the like are so open that it means that, as far as logic of '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 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, would be regarded as or understood as a moral stance of his, even though it had no connection at all with what he took to be human harm or well-being. If I say 'Always pull your ear twice and stick out your tongue before going out on the veranda' and consistently act on it, refuse to abandon it even though forcefully urged to, and universalize it—steadfastly urging others to do likewise—you could rightly say I had a thing about it (a blick if you will) but it could not, without a special background story in which some recognizable moral notions came into play, safely be called a 'moral view' of mine or a 'moral principle of conduct'. The mark of the moral seems to be linked with some content—perhaps (as common sense would seem to sanction) with human harm and well-being—though with what content we have yet to ascertain. 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 or what things we would categorically commit ourselves to.

We can conclude from this that in this line of investigation we have not uncovered a difference between the jogging case and the moral case that is of any particular philosophical or conceptual significance. What could count as an intelligible variation in their respective domains is tied to a determinate content, though in the jogging case it appears to be a far more determinate content. However, even this may give us a clue as to why it may be true that there can be authoritative views concerning jogging and health while there are no such views concerning the morality of personal relations. In the latter case it is not just a matter of choosing without guides or finally just having to commit yourself, but it is the case that the criteria of choice are more complex and more contested—that there is not the same settled ‘agreement in judgement’. But in saying this we have or at least seem to have something here that does not show a difference in kind but a difference in degree. And in seeing we have only a difference in degree, if that really is the best way of conceptualizing it, 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 health claims. But our feeling 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.

#### IV

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 wanted has a very special weight and—to put it minimally—is plainly relevant concerning answers to such questions about what to do. Now suppose, 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 cruel to him and grossly unfair’. If, parallel to the above case, I reply ‘I don’t care, I don’t want to be fair or even decent’, I have said something which is not only morally unhappy, it is conceptually unhappy as well. This ‘answer’ is conceptually unhappy 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 that way. I just ought to want to be fair and decent. If I do not have such desires and, even more importantly, whatever my desires may be, do not act in a fair and decent manner, these are very strong counts against me indeed. This is very different from the: ‘If you want to swim well, swim this way’ or ‘If you want to keep in shape, jog’. The stringently and most paradigmatically moral cases do not take, as peculiarly decisive, an uncovering of what you want

or even want on careful reflection—but in such cases we are perfectly willing to make claims which are, morally speaking, quite categorically binding and tell someone *what he ought to want* and ought to do. This is more evident in the case of deliberately treating one's son cruelly and unfairly than in the case of the husband caught in the conflict between son and stepmother. But it is less evident there because it is less evident what, morally speaking, ought to be done—the rights and wrongs of the matter are clearly in doubt. But, if it ever does become evident what he should do, the fact, if that is how things turn out, that it is still not what he wants to do, is no more relevant as a justification for not doing it than in the case of treating one's son unfairly. And even if this is a sort of quasi-tautology, it remains importantly true that he cannot simply offer what he wants as a finally decisive reason for acting in one way rather than in another, while this is perfectly appropriate in the non-moral cases. There are a range of very stringent and very central moral considerations that do not turn on ascertaining what the agent really wants or indeed would really want on reflection when adequately informed.

## V

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. Our feeling here is, or at least tends to be, that there can be no *authoritative* telling you what 'You ought to want' as there can be an authoritative advice giving about how best to attain what you want. Is this a liberal bias or (what is not the same thing) a fundamental liberal conviction, or at least a conviction which is not co-extensive with the whole range of either actual or conceivable moral responses, or (what again is not the same thing) rational moral responses? Or is this something which is built into the very 'logic of moral reasoning'? Is an authoritative view in morals some sort of conceptual or logical impossibility?

Let me return to the point from which we started: what, *vis-à-vis* the truth of moral claims, would it be like to attain an authoritative view? When, if ever, could people, 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 were true or certain moral claims were false? We both want to say that desires are not decisive, and indeed are typically irrelevant as reasons for morally acting in one way rather than another *and* that moral convictions or attitudes, when push comes to shove, are decisive in deciding what, morally speaking, we are to do and how we are to live. How, if at all, do these two things coherently go together? Moreover, what would it be like independently, of such convictions and attitudes, to establish that a whole moral orientation was a sound one? That is to say, 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 were true—true not only if someone accepted a certain

moral system, took a certain stance, committed himself/herself in a certain way, played a certain moral language-game, or lived in a certain tribe, but were true *überhaupt*? Denials that there can be authoritative *and* rational moralities or moral claims rest on a scepticism that anything like this can obtain. Indeed scepticism over morality often rests on such a belief. Is such scepticism justified?

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