Whither Moral Philosophy?

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Moral Theory and Ethical Sense

Let me begin with a quote from the opening of a once highly influential essay published over a century ago by the English philosopher H. A. Prichard titled “Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?”:

Probably to most students of Moral Philosophy there comes a time when they feel a vague sense of dissatisfaction with the whole subject. And the sense of dissatisfaction tends to grow rather than to diminish. It is not so much that the positions, and still more the arguments, of particular thinkers seem unconvincing, though this is true. It is rather that the aim of the subject becomes increasingly obscure. “What,” it is asked, “are we really going to learn by Moral Philosophy?” “What are books on Moral Philosophy really trying to show, and when their aim is clear, why are they so unconvincing and artificial?”

Prichard’s diagnosis of the unconvincingness of ethical theory is that philosophers have been looking for arguments that would allow the derivation of claims of moral duty or obligation from nondeontological premises, but such searches he maintains must be in vain. The two principal routes they have followed in seeking obligation-generating assumptions have been (1) claims about what advantage would accrue in consequence to the agent (typically the promotion of his or her happiness) or (2) claims about what goods would be realized in the performance of certain actions. According to Prichard, however, the problem with these personal and impersonal modes of justification is that they fail to provide an intrinsic noncircular link to obligation. The first yields a prudential motive, not a moral reason. The second only provides a reason where the goodness of the action consists in its being the fulfillment of an obligation, and hence as a way of justifying claims of duty, it is circular. Prichard’s conclusion is that while obligations can be recognized noninferentially they cannot be independently justified. As a matter of guidance, one may answer the question “Why must I?” by giving reasons, but the answers, if they are genuinely moral ones, will draw on a tight circle of synonyms: “It is your duty,” “You have an obligation,” “There is a moral requirement.”

Prichard’s argument assumes that there really are moral obligations to be

accounted for, but a skeptic might take nonderivability to support the idea that no such obligations exist. The warrant for Prichard’s nonskeptical conclusion, however, is what he takes to be the manifest fact of the sense of duty and the facticity of the objects of that sense. This part of his argument is akin to that developed by G. E. Moore in defense of common sense about the existence of the external world.\(^2\) For just as Moore held that the belief that one is presented in experience with independently existing objects is more credible than any argument to the contrary, so Prichard maintained that the presumption of real obligations is more plausible than any denial or debunking explanation of such moral intuitions.

I will have more to say in response to Prichard’s argument later on, but at this point I return to the opening passage, now reading it apart from the purpose it served in the context of his essay and seeing in it the expression of a feeling of dissatisfaction with moral philosophy that one might have on other grounds than those he diagnoses. I have in view especially the following sentences: ‘‘What,’’ it is asked, ‘‘are we really going to learn by Moral Philosophy?’ ‘What are books on Moral Philosophy really trying to show, and when their aim is clear, why are they so unconvincing and artificial?’’ These questions stand out anew a century after Prichard posed them, now in relation to much that is published in journals and books or presented in symposia and conferences, which, it is expected, graduate students aspiring to become professional philosophers will read, absorb, and emulate in their own work.

In light of the scale and character of these productions, I want to raise the question of whether in recent decades moral philosophy has in some part lost its way and become disconnected from lived experience, the aspects of life out of which it claims to arise as reflection upon prephilosophical thought and practice. This is in part a historical question, and it is one that I think David Solomon is likely to have thoughts about. Certainly he has a long-standing interest in and has done much research on the historical development of English-language moral philosophy through the course of the twentieth century. Much of that interest is focused on British philosophy, particularly what went on in Oxford beginning in the late 1950s involving figures such as Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, Iris Murdoch, and Bernard Williams, and of course he has a very deep knowledge of the thematic and dialectical developments in the work of Alasdair MacIntyre.

These figures, though differing in small or large ways in the manner of their approaches and the substance of their views, share certain common characteristics as thinkers, characteristics also shared by Solomon. They are all “serious” people, not grave—indeed far from it, for all have been alert to the humorous absurdities of human life and shared a taste and capacity for ironic wit. Rather their seriousness is that of deeply reflective human beings for whom philosophy is a matter of

thinking long and hard about matters that arise in the course of common life and not an intellectual parlor game or a series of puzzle-setting and puzzle-solving competitions. They are also people of broad literary imagination, historical perspective, and moral commitment. Indeed I would say that for all those mentioned, moral philosophy is never far removed from generally recognizable moral perplexity and is to be checked against it, not in the manner of a theory being tested against individual intuitions, but as ideas being compared with experience. Something of this latter outlook is conveyed in the following passage from Bernard Williams: “There could be a way of doing moral philosophy that started from the ways in which we experience our ethical life. Such a philosophy would reflect on what we believe, feel, take for granted; the ways in which we confront obligations and recognize responsibility; the sentiments of guilt and shame. It would involve a phenomenology of the ethical life. This could be a good philosophy, but it would be unlikely to yield an ethical theory.”

Philosophers of this non-(if not anti-)theoretical type could hardly feel enthusiasm for much of the work that has become prominent in “analytical ethics” over the last quarter century, particularly the following:

1. That which projects the diversity and complexity of human existence via utility functions into a space of welfare distributions
2. That which converts any ethical consideration into a rights (or duties) claim
3. That which presupposes that the ethical belongs to either the ontology of natural science or to that of some “supernatural” domain
4. That which seeks to “scientize” moral philosophy whether through technicality or by subsuming it within some actual or, as it might seem, “pseudo” science such as evolutionary psychology
5. That which draws distinctions that make no difference—for example, between versions of a theory every instance of which falls to the same objection
6. That which demonstrates at length and with some ingenuity the possible defenses of a theoretical position without giving any convincing reason rooted in common experience to think that such a position may be true
7. That which seeks to turn every thought into a theory
8. That which proceeds without regard to the actual nature of human agents or to

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3 Bernard Williams, Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy (London: Fontana, 1985). 93. In writing “but it would be unlikely to yield an ethical theory,” Williams is not taking that consideration to be an objection to this kind of moral philosophy. On the contrary he thinks that much of what is wrong with the subject is that it is driven by the presumption that the forming of a general theory is necessary and hence possible. He thought it is neither. Although he does not mention him, I suspect that this passage shows the influence on Williams of the Hungarian philosopher Aurel Kolnai, who had been a colleague of Williams at Bedford College, London, and whose collection of essays Williams coauthored (with David Wiggins) an introduction. See F. Dunlop and B. Klug, eds., Ethics, Value, and Reality: Selected Papers of Aurel Kolnai (London: Athlone, 1977).
natural possibilities or necessities
9. That which makes philosophical ethics the handmaiden of social causes or cultural movements
10. That which proceeds as if moral philosophy began around or even later than the date to which the English poet Philip Larkin assigned the beginning of “sexual intercourse”:

   Sexual intercourse began
   In nineteen sixty-three
   (which was rather late for me)—
   Between the end of the “Chatterley” ban
   And the Beatles’ first LP.\(^4\)

Manners and Modes of Moral Philosophy

Distaste or skepticism for or about 1 to 10 may be met with the counter that earlier moral philosophy tended to be conducted as if it were a branch of personal-cum-

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\(^4\) From “Annus Mirabilis” in Philip Larkin Collected Poems, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber & Faber, 2003). The Beatles’ first LP was Please Please Me—itself a somewhat Larkinian title. With verse and irony in mind, and in the context of honoring David Solomon, whose mode of being a philosopher is in sharp contrast to that here parodied, I include, in the hope of his appreciation of it, an adaptation of W. S. Gilbert’s lyrics for the patter song “I Am the Very Model of a Modern Major-General” from The Pirates of Penzance:

I am the very model of a modern philosophical
   My research is specialised, sectorial, and technical
   I know the leading journals and departments hyperlogical
   From \(PPR\) and \(NYU\) in orders periodical.

I’m very well acquainted, too, with matters academical,
   I understand peer-rankings, both the simple and Leiterial
   About the latest hirings I’m teeming with hot news
   and my web-site, blogs and twitters offer copious reviews.

I excel in footnotes lengthy and parentheses ambiguous;
   I know the current names of theories quite ridiculous
   In short, in matters professional and sectional,
   I am the very model of a modern academical.

Yet my knowledge, though I’m plucky and adventury,
   Barely reaches past the beginnings of this century;
   But still, in matters formalised and theoretical,
   I am the very model of a modern philosophical.
literary reflection or as moral counseling being in either case impressionistic and/or unmethodical, and that by contrast recent analytical ethics, whatever may be the verdict on particular examples, represent the effect of rigorous investigation and analysis and the application of a scientific outlook free of cultural prejudices and ideological biases.

So far as freedom from prejudice is concerned, there is a serious question whether contemporary academic moral philosophers exhibit pervasive mauvais foi, posturing as independent thinkers while conforming their opinions, methods, and modes of production to norms dominant within their peer group and congenial to their patrons, thereby securing approbation and advancement, but also confirming themselves to members of an academic petite bourgeoisie. Such a possibility was an ongoing source of concern to philosophers of the earlier disposition such as Anscombe, MacIntyre, Williams, Stuart Hampshire, and Iris Murdoch, but the advocates of the new and improved versions of analytic ethics seem curiously unaware of this possibility. This may be because, unlike those earlier figures, none of whom engaged in Ph.D. research, the present generation of philosophers has been inducted into patterns of intellectual activity that are inwardly academic, in-group referential, and unremittingly publication oriented. This intensive professionalization of philosophy has meant that even when it looks beyond the academy, it generally does so through academic lenses facetted to facilitate systematization and heavily colored in the hues of one or another currently fashionable theory. This should be a cause not only of disappointment but of suspicion and even fear, for the co-option of academics to the fashions of the age means the transmission of those fashions and the habit of obeisance to students and thereby to those whom they in turn will influence.

As regards the matter of rigor of analysis and argumentation, there is an obvious question to be asked about what constitutes rigor. So far as it concerns care and thoroughness, it cannot but be a virtue of philosophical inquiry, but that does not mean that it requires formalization or the pluralization of merely logically distinct possibilities, whether as theories or as imagined examples disconnected from any reality-rooted sense of conceivability. A rigorous use of the imagination is valuable in philosophy, but it needs to be exercised under the discipline that distinguishes the imaginary from the merely fantastical.

On the matter of analysis and argumentation, there is no lack of this in the writings of Anscombe, Foot, or Williams, whom I select as earlier Oxford philosophers that Solomon particularly admires, and here I could add Peter Winch and David Wiggins, but for them argument is proportioned to necessity and is not engaged in simply for its own sake. The point might be made by way of an analogy with the arts: facility—for example, in draftsmanship, in color contrast and harmonization, or in instrument playing or orchestration—is one thing; judgment about how much of these should be exercised and to what purpose and appreciation
of when is too much and of what ends are banal are another.

One mark of argument inflation, explained in part by the market conditions of production, distribution, and exchange in which academics operate and by which they and their peers judge their success, is the growth in the length of academic papers and in the number of footnotes and references therein to peer group members. Anscombe’s essay “On Brute Facts” and Peter Geach’s “Ascriptivism” and “Good and Evil” did much to turn the tide in the 1960s and 1970s against ethical subjectivism and continue to be referred to more than half a century later, but they only run to four, five, and ten pages, respectively. Likewise Williams’ “Practical Necessity” and “Internal and External Reasons,” which gave renewed support to noncognitivism in the decade or so following the Anscombe-Geach revolution, run to only eight and thirteen pages but likewise continue to have influence.

David Solomon himself demonstrates a significant capacity for rigorous analysis and argumentation in his early paper “Ethical Theory.” In this he takes on what at the time was an unengaged challenge to expound and assess the complex, highly distinctive, and difficult to categorize views of Wilfred Sellars on the nature and structure of ethical thought. In a letter to Solomon (written, I presume on the basis of the date, in response to a prepublication version of the essay), Sellars observes, “You have done an excellent job of tracing the dialectical structure of my thinking on these topics. You have been particularly successful in grasping what I was up to in ‘Imperatives, Intentions and the Logic of Ought.’”

In “Ethical Theory” Solomon sets out what he describes as “a [trilevel] model for understanding the general problematic of classical metaethics.”

L1) statements of fact

↓

L2) moral judgments

↓

L3) actions

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8 Letter from Wilfred Sellars to David Solomon, June 28, 1976. For the text, see http://www.ditext.com/sellars/css.html##.
This serves to locate what he terms “the two fundamental problems in [Anglo-American] ethics”: the problem of *justification*, or how to understand the arrow leading from L1 to L2, and the problem of *motivation*, represented by that proceeding from L2 to L3. This framework also provides for an interesting identification and contrast between broad groups of metaethical theories. In this scheme *naturalism* is specified as holding that there is an entailment between L1 and L2 because the meaning of ethical statements is fully accounted for by the empirical criteria of their application. In contrast *noncognitivism* denies that statements of fact imply moral propositions but holds that moral judgments are noncontingently related to actions because the former amount to expressions of commitment—in its simple prescriptivism version, someone who judges that doing A is good expresses thereby a subjective commitment to doing A. Prichard is then introduced as representing a further position in his version of *intuitionism*. According to this moral judgments are truth apt and bear upon action but are neither equivalent nor reducible to statements of empirical fact, nor are they logically related to motivation.

I will return to the question of the nature of the three levels and the relation between them later, proposing an account that I believe Solomon may find congenial. While in a broadly naturalist tradition, it does not conform exactly to Solomon’s logical characterization of that. By his own account, however, that characterization is somewhat limited and idealized, so the matter of conformity may not concern either of us very much if at all. At this point, however, I want to revert to the issue of the character of recent and contemporary moral philosophy and to the possibility that it is in a period of academic malaise.

**In and out of the Linguistic Turn**

In the past couple of decades, there has been a fashion for returning to the works of what were hitherto somewhat neglected, or explicitly rejected, moral philosophers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries such as T. H. Green, F. H. Bradley, G. E. Moore, and W. D. Ross, as well as Prichard. The reasons for this return are threefold. First, it is partly to do with the familiar phenomenon that when a subject seems close to exhaustion, it can be refreshing to look to its history. Second, there is the thought that work from the past may contain themes and ideas that can be redeployed today. Third is the possibility of understanding how and why more recent trends developed.

I have suggested that an important part of the answer to the last of these lies not with the internal dialectic of thought but with the sociology of academic professionalization. There is, though, a philosophical reason relating to the prior discounting of the figures listed. This is to do with the development among
Anglophone philosophers from the 1930s on a heightened sense of the philosophical significance of the study of language—that is to say, of logical features of natural languages and of the discoveries such study might yield.

The origins of this development lie in the work of Frege, Russell, and Wittgenstein, but the method of linguistic analysis in application to ethical discourse was first brought to the attention of English-language philosophers by A. J. Ayer in *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936) and in the following year by C. L. Stevenson in “The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms” (1937) and then in developed form in his highly influential *Ethics and Language* (1944). This rapidly established “tradition” of doing moral philosophy by linguistic analysis was further advanced by R. M. Hare in a series of books beginning with *The Language of Morals* (1952) and continued with greater immersion in the philosophy of language (which had itself become increasingly sophisticated and quasi-technical) by the likes of Simon Blackburn, Alan Gibbard, Crispin Wright, and Mark Schroeder.

This line of development saw itself as novel and progressive, the former in bringing to light hitherto unrealized aspects of moral talk, the latter in achieving ever more subtle formulations of theses about the nature and import of such discourse. For the most part the tendency of the analysts was subjectivist, either emotivist/expressivist: “$x$ is good” = “hoorah for $x$,” or descriptive/relativist: “$x$ is good” = “I favour $x$.” Both versions of this were retrospectively attributed to David Hume, though it is doubtful that he saw himself as giving any kind of linguistic or semantic analysis, and among the several things he says are statements that seem to be expressions of, or at any rate to be compatible with, different accounts of the logical status of moral statements.

In the first presentation of his sentimentalist/affective theory of morality in the *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), Hume writes, “When you pronounce any action or character to be vicious, you mean nothing, but that from the constitution of your nature you have a feeling or sentiment of blame from the contemplation of it.” But forty years later (1777) in *Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding and the Principles of Morals*, he writes, “The approbation or blame which then ensues [regarding human action], cannot be the work of the judgement, but of the heart; and is not a speculative proposition or affirmation, but an active feeling or sentiment.” The latter seems to equate favorable judgment with the expression of a sentiment, whereas the former identifies it with a judgment ascribing such a sentiment to oneself. To ask “Which is Hume’s settled view?” it is one of which I think Hume himself was innocent and of which is in any case tangential to his main point—viz., that while reason plays a part in morality, it is the servant (famously he says “slave,” but that is rhetorical) of affective sensibility,

which he is usually quoted as referring to as the “passions” but he also terms “humanity.”

Since twentieth- and twenty-first-century philosophers tend to regard such a view as amounting to “emotivism” or “expressivism” and associate these terms with logico-linguistic “discoveries,” they are apt to overlook the fact that Hume himself links his affective theory with ancient authors whose interests were anthropological rather than logical, as did his friend and follower in these matters, Adam Smith. On this account it may be that rather than side with or oppose Hume by means of some logico-linguistic strategy, we should try to consider his views as reflections on human psychology, setting aside his own not infrequent and sometimes incautious rhetoric and consider how they correspond to moral consciousness.

There were, of course, some contrary voices within the “linguistic school.” Chief among these were the aforementioned Anscombe and Geach, who offered distinct but complementary observations about the informal logic of requirement and evaluation. Anscombe’s point was that the category of descriptive statements, conceived in part to be contrasted with evaluative and prescriptive ones, was coarsely specified: not distinguishing between statements of (1) bodily movement, (2) action (intentionally characterized), (3) social performances, and (4) institutional exchanges. Such distinctions she deemed necessary for the purpose of interpretation so as to answer questions about what an agent did. But she also identified hierarchies in such descriptions, which she expressed in terms of the relationship of brute relativity: “It comes to light that the relation of the facts [that I ordered potatoes from a grocer, he supplied them, and he sent me a bill] to the description ‘X owes Y so much money’ is an interesting one, which I will call that of being ‘brute relative to’ that description. Further, the ‘brute’ facts mentioned here themselves have descriptions relatively to which other facts are ‘brute’—as, e.g., he had potatoes carted to my house and they were left there are brute facts relative to ‘he supplied me with potatoes.’”11 One way of interpreting Anscombe’s insight is to say that statements of fact may imply statements of requirement, but this way of putting things concedes too much to the neo-Humean orthodoxy that statements can be classified exclusively (though not exhaustively) as either descriptive or prescriptive, whereas it might be more accurate to think in terms of “descriptive/prescriptive entanglement” or even as aspect abstraction—a suggestion to which I will return. In any event she thought that in some contexts, the fact that certain things had occurred noncontingently (though defeasibly) justified the assertion that certain things ought to be done.

Geach’s insight concerned the logically prior matter of evaluation. Beginning with Moore’s attack on definitions of “good,” which by means of the

open-question argument he sought to show confused the “is” of predication (“happiness is good”) with that of identity (“goodness = happiness”), linguistic philosophers had tended to the view that claims about goodness are logically independent of nonevaluative predications. What Geach showed in “Good and Evil” (1956, however, is that in its logically primary use, “good” is an attributive adjective and thereby a semantically incomplete term, the completion of which in an expression includes a sortal noun (or verb) such that “good-k” implies standards for the evaluation of things (or actions) of that kind. Thus in Geach’s view whether a is a good k depends on what ks are or are for.

This insight is easier to grasp than is Anscombe’s, but both are irrefutable in their respective cores, even if one may quibble about outlying cases. Similarly discomfiting to semantic subjectivists (whether expressivists or relativists) is Geach’s observation that whatever the analysis of the meaning of utterances in which “good” or “bad” or “right” or “wrong” (or more specific determinations) feature, as used rather than as quoted, inferences involving them must be uniform. Since inference is defined in terms of truth preservation from premises to conclusion, this requires treating them descriptively across the range of a discourse.

There is no question, I believe, that the development of analytical metaethics brought greater logical acumen and that there was real progress in understanding the relation between the logical properties of terms and statements, their potential inferential relations and their aptness for truth. Additionally there was a recognition that there may be noncontingent, conceptual relations short of deductive entailment. This “discovery,” explicitly championed by Geach but shared by Anscombe and deployed by Foot, is relevant to the earlier issue of whether the naturalist needs to be committed to saying that statements of fact may entail evaluative judgments or whether they are prohibited from saying that evaluative judgments are noncontingently related to motivation. At the same time what was originally introduced in the context of defending the presumption of cognitivism from the logico-semantic versions of subjectivism later became a self-sustaining industry in which ingenuity was deployed in the fashioning of nonstandard logics, expressivist semantics, and other exotic blooms of philosophical horticultural specialization.

If the earlier British idealist and moral intuitionist figures I mentioned were neglected because they seemed logically unsophisticated, they have been recovered, I suggest, in part because of a sense that in moral philosophy, logical ingenuity will not achieve a great deal, and the preoccupation with it, and with philosophy of language, as with ontology, is a distraction from the business of addressing the issues of justification and motivation and of understanding the character and significance of moral experience. Here the point may be more effectively put by thinking about the experience of making and evaluating art. Suppose one is trying to work out a scheme of composition that, at one and the
same time, will serve to stabilize a group of figures while also conveying a sense of tension primed for explosive movement or is trying to find a medium of representation that allows its formal properties to saturate the particular content that is to be expressed. It may be illuminating to understand how some courses of action would be better than others, some commendable, some facile, and so on, but what relevance could there be in being given a theory of the semantics of the terms in which such thought might be expressed or reported? What and how might it contribute to the business to hear about the ontological status of the features being deployed and evaluated?

The answers may not be “none,” but the unobviousness of claims to relevance, to put it no more strongly, requires that they be demonstrated. Someone might respond first that philosophical aesthetics is unlike moral philosophy in that it is not concerned with the sphere of practical rationality, but that is evidently false, at least so far as concerns a large part of aesthetics—viz., the philosophy of art. Second, it might be claimed that metaethics, or meta-aesthetics, understood as being concerned with the logic, semantics, epistemology, and ontology of evaluative and/or prescriptive claims, should not be expected to illuminate the subject matter of ethics or aesthetics per se. Admittedly from Language, Truth and Logic onwards, that claim to purely second-order, nonsubstantive status has been a common refrain, but this should give us reason to wonder whether metaenquiries have anything to contribute to understanding the specific content of evaluative and practical thought. For the fact is that they are really enquiries in speculative philosophy happening to use examples from these domains as illustrations but without requiring interest in them per se, let alone as parts of lived human experience. It is no surprise, therefore, that the examples are so bland and sparsely specified as in discussions of the Frege/Geach problem: “If it is wrong to lie, then it is wrong to get your little brother to lie.” This in turn prompts the suggestion that insofar as someone is trying to understand the substance of moral thought and argumentation, he or she may have little need for metaethics and the suspicion that it may be largely “epiphenomenal.”

Return to the General Problematic

This is not to say that moral philosophy proper consists only in the identification of moral considerations and the casuistical resolution of problem cases where values and principles are in seeming conflict, for there are more abstract questions about the grounds of evaluative claims, the relation of the latter to prescriptive judgments, and the bearing of those on rational motivation. Here, therefore, I return to the issue raised by Prichard and to what Solomon termed the “general problematic of classical metaethics.” Prichard’s challenge to the idea that statements of requirement could be derived from statements of fact was that even where the latter
might be cast in terms of good and bad, they could not establish moral ought-to-do-ness, for either they fail by only generating a prudential imperative or else they get things back to front because the intrinsic goodness of an action consists in its being the observance of an obligation. It should be clear, however, that this argument involves contentious presuppositions: first that there is a clear distinction between prudential and moral considerations, second that oughtness is prior to impersonal goodness, third and more specifically that notions of duty and obligation (obligatoriness) are the fundamental concepts of ethics, and fourth that the structure and content of actual moral thinking might be understood independently of the nature of the agents to which it applies.

It is a significant fact that things look very different in philosophy depending on where one begins, and part of the difference is that some perspectives seem to generate problems almost immediately. In epistemology, for example, one might begin by asking how we have certain kinds of knowledge, such as general knowledge about natures, or one might ask how we can ever know anything other than our own conscious states—and indeed whether we even have knowledge about those. Evidently the latter approach does more than invite skepticism; it seems to ensure its presence at the outset and then famously struggles to evict it.

In moral philosophy if one begins with the idea that the ethical domain is composed of requirements, then an immediate question arises of what to say to someone who asks why he or she should do as the requirement states or who wonders whether and why those requirements apply to him or her at all. By making brute obligatoriness the nonconvertible currency of the moral economy, Prichard creates the possibility of rational skepticism and has no response to it other than reasserting claims of duty. If instead one begins with values and ideals, then the sceptics’ task is made harder and appears as a recognizably speculative one. The kind of moral philosophy that begins, as Williams put it, “from the ways in which we experience our ethical life…[reflecting] on what we believe, feel, take for granted” invites questions about the correctness of an analysis, distinguishing, for example, between regret at having done something from remorse about the action and again between this and shame felt at what it implied about one’s character. Asking “Was the shame I felt matched by remorse?” is one way of trying to improve one’s moral consciousness, but it presupposes rather than prompts doubts about the applicability of the concepts involved. Perhaps moral skepticism remains a possibility, but it now looks forced and fabricated.

Suppose, however, without giving unnecessary hostages to fortune, one wants to turn from the particularities of moral phenomenology to something theoretical with which he or she may be connected. What might be the starting point? Well, we might recall something that Kant says in his Critique of Judgment: “In order to consider something good, I must always know what sort of thing the object is [meant] to be, i.e., I must have a concept of it. But I do not need this in
order to find beauty in something. Flowers, free designs, lines aimlessly intertwined and called foliage: these have no significance, depend on no determinate concept, and yet we like them.” In fact Kant allows that there is a kind of aesthetic judgment (of dependent beauty) that does require having a concept of the subject of which beauty is predicated, but his claim is that this is secondary to free beauty, in which there is pleasure at something independent of any conceptualization of it. While a sound pattern may (or may not) be conceived of as birdsong, the tones and their pattern may please simply on account of their phenomenal character. I am not altogether convinced that such experience is not concept dependent, but that is not to the present point. Rather my interest is in the idea of dependent beauty, where the concept under which something is brought is the ground for an aspectual form of predication: for example, “x is beautiful qua horse,” or more perspicuously “x is beautiful in respective of features belonging to it as a horse,” features for which being a horse provides certain standards—for example, of overall shape, proportion, or integrity of parts. When Kant says that judgments of “good” are always concept dependent, he is not thinking of moral goodness in his own particular understanding of this but of the goodness of things that have functions or characteristic activities, things that can be thought of teleologically, and on that account be judged to act well or badly.

The introduction of teleology may be thought presumptuous, but it is present from the outset as the concepts are acquired. The mass of everyday (and scientific) sortal concepts are the products of abstractive inductions, formulations of general descriptive-cum-explanatory classifications. How they are passed on is through language, and it is helpful to think of how children are taught the meanings of these sorts of words. This typically involves certain kinds of ostensive activity, pointing at examples where it is presupposed that these are stereotypical. In fact it is commonly done through using pictures, which are intended as abstract specifications (though their serving as such is not an intrinsic property since they are themselves particulars but depend on a grammatical context in which singular and general terms are distinguished by use).

What a child learns, therefore, in learning the word cat, say, is an abstract generalization, moreover one that is articulable in various generic statements such as “cats have legs,” “cats see,” “cats meow,” and so on. These are substance-involving predications, and they are also teleological in character: legs are the organs of walking; seeing is the activity defined in terms of its achieving a certain end, say the discrimination of light and dark; meowing is something cats do as part of their characteristic behavior with some unspecified purposes(s); and so on. What follows is that everyday concepts bring with them characterizations of the things falling under them that imply functions or activities that can be judged well or badly

realized. We can go further, however, for it is implicit in these concepts that as well as distinguishing between (1) what belongs to the sortal per se and necessarily and (2) what may be predicated of it, there is a distinction within the latter category between what is proper to the sortal and what is purely contingent. For example,

1. it belongs per se to the sortal cat that cats are alive,
2. it belongs properly but not essentially to it that cats have eyes, and
3. it belongs only contingently that cats are to be found in North America.

It is not, absent some special story in which location is related to the preservation of a proper feature, a privation of a cat qua cat that it is not in North America, but it is a privation of it that it lacks eyes. It is not a privation but the ceasing to be of a cat that it lacks life. Sortal-dependent judgments of function or activity belong therefore not to the essence of a kind or primarily to purely contingent features of members of its extension but to proper characteristics, “propria.” A cat’s activity, or generalizing across functions its “life,” is bad to the extent that it is lacking in certain propria or in the ability to exercise them effectively. Circumstances may lessen the disvalue of this or a situation may render the lack or defect circumstantially advantageous, but that is per accidens.

Pressing on, we may say that a category of natural evaluative judgments is introduced by characterizations of something as being an instance of an animate species-sortal. It is one thing, however, to say that an eyeless cat is defective qua cat, another to say that a myopic cat’s seeing is defective (qua cat sight), and another still to say that a cat’s abandonment of her kittens to escape some discomfort is bad qua nurturing role. The latter is couched in terms that imply knowledge and intention, but even if we were to reject the appropriateness of this, we may still say that, other things being equal, the action was defective with respect to the mother’s role. Note that the badness is not derivative from the presumed harm in this case to the kittens, and in fact none may have resulted; rather it pertains to the action as a failure of what was due given the mothering role and its functions.

The application of this structure to the human case is easy enough, though here questions of knowledge, intention, and voluntariness do apply in determining the appropriate action description and the issue of responsibility. There are additional features also. First, as with animate kinds generally, the primary operation of an organ, function, or activity is related to its role in the overall life of the animal, and there is therefore an issue of levels of description and evaluation. In the human case, however, the layering is greater and the interactions between them more complex, including weighing of functions and roles and of the goods to which they are directed. There are also cooperative functions brought into being to serve the interests of social interaction among which is a special category of “social acts.” These involve expressed or implied undertakings that in the context of uptake by others and with appropriate mutual knowledge of the parties’ beliefs and intentions constitute such actions as, for example, promises and orders and social

There is, of course, a connection between the foregoing and what Aquinas has to say in response to question 94 of \textit{Summa Theologiae, Prima Secundae: “Whether the natural law contains several precepts or only one?”}

Since good has the nature of an end, and bad, the nature of a contrary, hence it is that all those things to which man has a natural inclination, are naturally apprehended by reason as being good, and consequently as objects of pursuit, and their contraries as bad, and objects of avoidance. Wherefore according to the order of natural inclinations, is the order of the precepts of the natural law. Because in man there is first of all an inclination to good in accordance with the nature which he has in common with all substances: inasmuch as every substance seeks the preservation of its own being, according to its nature: and by reason of this inclination, whatever is a means of preserving human life, and of warding off its obstacles, belongs to the natural law. Secondly, there is in man an inclination to things that pertain to him more specially, according to that nature which he has in common with other animals: and in virtue of this inclination, those things are said to belong to the natural law, “which nature has taught to all animals” such as sexual intercourse, education of offspring and so forth. Thirdly, there is in man an inclination to good, according to the nature of his reason, which nature is proper to him: thus man has a natural inclination to know the truth about God, and to live in society: and in this respect, whatever pertains to this inclination belongs to the natural law; for instance, to shun ignorance, to avoid offending those among whom one has to live, and other such things regarding the above inclination.\footnote{Thomas Aquinas, \textit{Summa Theologiae}, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 2nd and rev. ed. (London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1920–1922).}

The various inclinations or directional tendencies correspond to aspects of the proper nature of human beings, the sorts of things that are included in generics expressing it, such as “Humans seek to preserve their lives,” “Humans engage in sexual intercourse,” “Humans educate their offspring,” “Humans live in society.” In each case the activity is directed to an end the realization of which is a good and contributes to the overall good of human life. It is clear that these statements are descriptive but also that they are normative or norm implying. The latter aspect shows in the fact that it is not an open question whether, in general, it is good for human beings to seek to preserve their lives or to live in society. It is no objection
to this that it is not always for the best to live in society or that the claim that human beings do so has exceptions any more than it is an objection to the statement that cats have eyes that some do not. The statement pertains to the kind and is not logically equivalent to a lengthy conjunction of statements about individuals. Note also that the claim that human beings live in societies relates to a good to each and for all. It is not that social existence provides opportunities that an individual could not otherwise easily avail himself of and so has instrumental utility. Rather, the good is one partly constitutive of human well-being more generally, the partial and comprehensive goods consisting in the rationally controlled actualization of proper functions and activities.

Closing the Gaps

Recall Solomon’s diagram:

\[
\begin{align*}
L_1 & : \text{statements of fact} \\
& \quad \downarrow \\
L_2 & : \text{moral judgments} \\
& \quad \downarrow \\
L_3 & : \text{actions}
\end{align*}
\]

And allow me to suppose that enough has been said to show that certain instances of \(L_1\)—that is, propria-specifying generics—are both descriptive and normative, or directly norm implying: “Human beings eat” tells us both something of what human beings are (eaters) and what pertains to their good—viz., eating. It does not say that eating is always good or that in some circumstances it would be irrational to diet or to starve. A human’s eating is under the governance of reason as evidenced in the fact that we make decisions about what, how, and when to eat—which is not to say that no such decisions are irrational. Does this amount to a transition from \(L_1\) to \(L_2\)? That question cannot be answered without further specification of what is meant by “moral judgement.”

“You ought to eat” and even “You must eat” may be justified in a given case by reference to general facts about what is required for the maintenance of human life and particular facts about the condition and circumstance of an individual, but they are liable to sound like nonmoral, practical judgments—indeed just the sort of thing that Prichard claimed only provided prudential motives and not moral reasons. I observed, however, that this distinction may be question begging. Certainly we can imagine situations in which the same judgments might be made and then sound like “moral judgements,” but the difference may not be
one of kind rather than one of intensity or urgency of need. Prichard’s response will be that whether they are passing or vital, conceived in the way I have described, the judgments speak to something that the agent desires or needs and to that extent they remain prudential.

This, however, raises the question of what else is required for a prescription to be a moral one, once it has been allowed that practical reasons may be more or less weighty up to and including the point of pressing on the question of living or dying. Prichard speaks of “duty,” and it might be thought that this introduces something not so far explained both on account of duties being generally (and perhaps always) other-regarding and because of the particular deontological register in which they are voiced. So far as the former point is concerned, I allowed that the relevant *proprium* (“Human beings are social animals”) specifies a species good and recognition of this provides both self and other regarding reasons, or in Prichard’s terms, both personal and impersonal reasons. Second, I also noted that among cooperative functions brought into being to serve the interests of interaction are “social acts” and associated institutions. The justification for creating these is that they facilitate life, and in that sense they are conditional upon an independently specified end, but it does not follow that one can rationally eschew that end—a matter I turn to next—and nor does it follow that the social acts themselves cannot create unconditional (though possibly defeasible) obligations. The point is simple enough, at least in general form. The fact that human beings are amorous and affectionate reproductive animals that generate altricial young gives reason for institutions that would facilitate that important aspect of life. So the justification of marriage, for example, is broadly instrumental. But the internal nature of the institution may involve noninstrumental requirements, such as fidelity. On that account one can then speak of an unconditional duty, the explanation of which is the obligation acquired in entering into it.

Someone may allow this but insist that the surrounding framework of justification remains nonmoral insofar as it consists of various hypothetical imperatives to the effect that in order for certain goods to be attained, certain things have to be done. So even if something has been lifted into the sphere of the “moral” in the sense of the unconditional, it is only a small part of what might ordinarily be thought to belong to ethics in general. This form of objection insists again on drawing a special distinction between moral and other kinds of practical reasons, but given what I said about species-propra generics referring to the kind and not directly to the individual, it will not work to try to mark that distinction in terms of the impersonal/personal distinction.

What remains, I think, is the question of the character of the imperatives directly generated by reference to human nature. Put in terms of Kant’s distinction, the point will be that moral imperatives are categorical, whereas those I have introduced (other than the derived “social act” dependent ones) are hypothetical.
This is true. From “Human beings have altricial offspring,” it follows that newborn humans will not survive without care, and from this that they need care, and from this that they ought to be cared for. The last is true even if an individual to whom that fact was pointed out had no interest in providing care. But since it is also true that human beings are social animals and that they are sympathetic animals, such a person does have reason beyond the impersonal reason deriving from the need to provide care where he or she may be in a position to do so. The following pair both derive from statements of need: “Given that they are altricial, human newborns ought to be cared for” and “Given that you are a human being, you ought to be social and sympathetic.” Together and in relevant circumstances, these provide an agent with reason to provide help. What lies at the font of each is human nature, so while the conditionals are hypothetical, neither appeals to what an agent wants (and might equally well not want). Instead both are assertoric, referring to needs, those of the patient’s and those of a prospective agent. The needs in question derive directly from human propria, and one cannot rationally excuse oneself from these by saying that one chooses ends other than those one needs as a human being.

What though of the question of the relation between L2 and L3, where this concerns motivation? I have argued that certain noncontingent but nonessential features of human beings warrant ceteris paribus evaluation in respect of their deprivation (bad) or actualization (good). I have argued that the fact that something specified in highly general terms is good for a human being gives an agent defeasible reason to seek to protect or secure it. I have granted that the reasons are hypothetical but denied that they are merely instrumental in a rationally escapable sense since one cannot rationally be indifferent to one’s nature nor to what pertains to it. Suppose someone says, “I see that, but isn’t it possible that I just acknowledge this without in fact being moved to act?” The seeming intelligibility of this response is, I think, illusory and derives from viewing what has been said from the perspective of something like theoretical anthropology. If one is in the position of a practical deliberator wondering what to do and whether this or that consideration provides reasons to act in one way or another, then the question is not whether to move from stasis into action for one is already in motion and seeking guidance as to how to redirect oneself. That being the case, recognizing that there is reason in the circumstance to achieve human good by doing such and such is thereby motivational. Of course, one may be confused, or in perplexity about which of several options to follow, or not really interested in acting at all, or depressed and inert, and so on. Absent such defeaters, however, to recognize that one ought to do some specific thing is, in the context of active practical deliberation, to have a motivational as well as a justificatory reason to do it.

The Primacy of Experience
No doubt there is more that could be said at the foregoing level of abstraction, but the main work so far as moral thinking is concerned, both in respect of forming generalizations about human good and evil and in connection with particular situations, lies in discerning what pertains to the human good and in judging in concrete situations how various elements of that good may be protected or realized. In this it is more than merely relevant but essential that one is oneself a human subject, for the meaning and import of features may only be visible to human eyes or appreciable to human sensibilities. So I return to the thought that what moral philosophy needs is not more theorizing but more input from reflective experience, and again I return to an artistic analogy. Aesthetics may take the form of applied philosophy of mind, general ontology, philosophy of language, and epistemology while hardly touching the surface of actual aesthetic experience. Alternatively, it could give attention to the content of such experience trying to understand what it is about music, say, and particular pieces that enables it and them to carry so much meaning. Similarly a phenomenological approach in moral philosophy would look to explore the firmament of human value through the medium of reflection upon experience, noting and placing in relation various elements and identifying them for what they are and why and how much they matter. This may sound like a psychological exercise, but done in the way it needs to be, it is also conceptual and critical: distinguishing, for example, the range of character traits and dispositions and evaluating if and why they are either virtues or vices. It might also think about what it is to be in moral perplexity and how the character and situation of the deliberator might be necessary to determine a course of action, not presuming that what is determined is so for others in similar situations. There have been and are some philosophers whose personal experiences are so broad and deep and their imaginations and empathies so great that they can achieve much on their own account, but such are very few, and most of us would do well to read literary fiction, biography, history, and descriptive psychology, setting aside as unlikely to be of much if any help the copious products of contemporary metaethics. If they are to be studied for the purpose of understanding the human condition, it could be as examples of what happens when practitioners of an art or a science cease to use its methods to treat some independent subject matter and make the practice of the methods an end in itself, setting one exercise against another (what else could they be set against?) as professional performances self-consciously hoping to display inventiveness and ingenuity.
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