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An Ethical Dialogue

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Abstract

Since Plato philosophers have struggled to understand the nature of ethics. It seems different from understanding the world around us, which we do by means of our senses and our sciences. Like mathematics ethics seems different. My brief dialogue seeks to unravel its mystery, and may tell you all you need to know about it.

I decided to present this in the form of a dialogue. There are three voices: that of a real realist (RR), that of an expressivist (Ex), and that of a quasi-realist (QR)

RR. The most obvious thing about ethics is that some views are right, and others are misguided and wrong. It is right that we ought not to stamp on babies for fun (SOBF), wrong to think that it should be permissible to do so. The one view is true, the other untrue. Why so? Well one view corresponds with the facts, the other does not. It is a fact that we ought not to SOBF. We can put it by saying that SOBF has a moral property – impermissibility or wrongness – which must be acknowledged. It is as if there is a notice hanging on it saying that it is not to be done, only the notice is not hung by our own hands. This property, of being permissible or impermissible, belongs to types of behaviour independently of how we happen to think about them. Moral properties make demands on us, and we can't escape those demands by ignoring them or pretending otherwise. Moral views which are true are so because they correctly describe this independent reality. It is written in cold marble.

Some of my colleagues, also realists, think that moral properties are no more than natural properties: goodness might be creating happiness for example, and it is then an empirical matter to settle where they apply. But I agree with those who say there is a significant gap between describing the world in natural terms, and seeing things in a moral light, which implies an extra sensitivity to what is demanded of us and of everyone.¹

(Ex) I am not so sure about this. I don't really like an abstract world in which demands sit, waiting for us to notice them. What kind of existence do these things have? Who issues these demands? You might say that God does, but that simply raises the question of whether God issues the right demands. Maybe God isn't wholly good – after all, the world he created is not all that perfect. Does nature issue these demands? Well nature is pretty heartless. It is impossible to imagine nature (apart from our own human natures) caring about how we behave. Nature is the domain of natural laws, not moral laws. Parasites and viruses are natural, after all. No, the right thing to say about ethics is that it is essentially practical. With the language of 'right' and 'wrong', 'good' and 'bad', 'ought' and 'ought not' we express our attitudes,



policies, desires, preferences, prohibitions. We put them into the public square, and try to persuade other people to feel the same way.²

(RR) But if that is all there is to it isn't the whole business a bit of a sham? When someone condemns SOBF or anything else, they are assuming a mantle of authority, of being *right* about something. Whereas you make it seem that they are just sounding off: merely venting their own feelings.

(Ex) No. I am not suggesting that 'anything goes'. Practical discussion can be conducted with care and thought and, at least before the days of populist politicians, conspiracy theorists, and Tik-Tok, only views that are carefully thought out would persuade people. For example, if we are discussing which school or university it would be best to choose, we don't just say 'Let's go here' or 'Let's go there'. We weigh up the pluses and minuses of the various choices. We advance

considerations for and against, and hope eventually to agree in the light of them. Similarly with moral choices.

And going onto the attack – what account do you have of your moral facts or moral properties that tells us why we should care about them? Are they mere metaphysical sunshine, such as was supposed to dazzle Plato's hero when he left the Cave? Plato himself left it totally unclear what the value of this vision was when his hero returned to the Cave – that is, to the mundane world of pleasures, pains, desires and aversions. As far as we are told his hero did not return to the Cave with any extra ways of persuading other people of anything.

(RR) I think you forget that a lot of people called existentialists held something like your view around about the Second World War, but when the horror of the concentration camps became apparent, people wanted to embrace

moral realities again. Faced with real evil, they needed that it *really was* evil, not just that we call it that. If you ask how we know the moral truth, I answer that we know it by exercising reason, in the same way that we know mathematical and logical truth. For example, we can see that claiming exemptions for ourselves from social norms that we apply to other people is clearly way off colour. If a Prime Minister were to do it (heaven forbid) we would see them as totally unreasonable.³

‘... what account do you have of your moral facts or moral properties that tells us why we should care about them?’

(Ex) Obviously we can spray the charge of being unreasonable about. If someone gets hot under the collar because they have been overtaken on a motorway, I would call them unreasonable, but it is their emotional make-up that is faulty. I could call your politician unreasonable, but it is not the strongest thing I would say about him, the self-serving bastard. It’s not much like making a logical or mathematical mistake. We can prove logical or mathematical inconsistency since it is important to everyone, always to avoid inconsistency. We literally cannot understand anyone who persists in supposing that $7 + 5$ is 13, or that it is raining and it is not. But take some nasty piece of work who makes a living by scamming people into handing over their bank accounts. We can understand him well enough. We understand his motives but also his lack of honesty and lack of conscience. It is regrettable and he is to be condemned, but it is difficult to say that he lacked reason in doing what he did. He knew what he wanted, and may have set about getting it with considerable skill. It is his heart that is wrong, not his head.

I sometimes think that we are misled by the ways in which we talk. I admit that it can sound as if morality sits above us, judges us and exercises authority over us. But I think that is a mirage, aided and abetted by the way we talk. Perhaps we should not say or think that this ought to be done, or that ought not, or that this is good and that bad.⁴

(QR) Perhaps I can step in here to help my good friend Ex. I agree with RR that the revulsion and disgust that the horrors of the holocaust provoked lead us to say that these agents were really evil. But I don’t think Ex should deny that or be worried by it. We rightly say that they were evil as a way of expressing our revulsion and horror. Similarly, we rightly say their deeds were disgusting as a way of expressing our disgust. And then if we add ‘really’ it is a way of emphasizing that these are the reactions to have. We signal, in effect, that we don’t regard this as even debatable. The feelings are ones all decent people share, and must share. If anyone does not do so, he or she forfeits their own title to any respect. Furthermore, Ex and I can easily explain why it is important that people share those reactions, since that is our best defence against such atrocities in the future. Whereas as Ex just said, it’s a bit mysterious why your self-standing moral properties are so important, or why it is so important to discern them rightly.

(Ex) Going back to more cheerful topics, we can also say that various features of character such as courage, honesty, diligence, and so on are really virtues. That is a way of expressing heartfelt admiration of them. Hume thought that this was because they were qualities of mind useful to ourselves and to others, which sounds about right.

(RR) I think it is important to discern what you are calling the cold marble of moral fact rightly because it is important to believe, or even to know, that the cruelty and lack of humanity revealed in those camps was wrong, really wrong. It is only once we are satisfied that they were wrong that we feel the very proper emotions of horror and disgust that you talk about.

(QR) Well, is it? You seem to be sticking a fifth wheel into the mix. Ex and I, taking in the horrible things done, move straight to

horror and revulsion. You, taking in the horrible things done, move into your own cold marble world of duties, rights and permissions, and only in the light of what you find there may feel the same horror and revulsion. But we can't understand the indirect path you need. Also, while the object of our feelings is straightforwardly the horrible things done, the object of your feelings seems to be the other-worldly moral properties. And we're not very happy about that. You seem to require one thought too many, like someone who kisses their partner because they conceive it to be their duty, not because they want to.⁵

Furthermore, it is easy for us to sketch the evolution of moral sentiments and feelings. They enable us to care for each other and also to care about cooperation and behaving in a trustworthy manner, and therefore they enable us to trust each other. They give us the foundation of social behaviour and all that this enables. Whereas it is hard to see what good a set of beliefs in your moral properties could do. What would be the awful consequence of getting them wrong? And if you can't answer that, then the door is open to a general scepticism: perhaps we only evolved to get them wrong, wholesale and across the board! You couldn't even say that if one thing with some set of natural properties is good or bad, then so is anything else with exactly the same set. Perhaps your moral properties flit about, alighting on some things but not others.⁶

(RR) Well that's as maybe. But let me attack in turn. According to Ex, moral 'beliefs' are much like attitudes or desires: aimed not at representing how the world is, but aimed at changing the world or conforming it to what you want. As it is sometimes put, they have a different direction of fit than beliefs. A desire for an ice cream doesn't purport to say that ice cream is available or even exists. It *wishes* that it does but doesn't *say* or *assert* that it does, or anything else. An expression of the desire might be something like 'Hooray for ice cream here, now, for me'. An aversion to spinach might be voiced as 'Boo to spinach here, now (or forever) for me'. But in that case, you couldn't say 'If ice cream is good then so is baked Alaska' or 'If spinach is awful, then so is

kale' because you can't make sense of 'if hooray...' Or 'if boo...'⁷

(QR) I have devoted a lot of thought to this. RR is right that we might need to say things like 'If lying is wrong, so is promise breaking' or 'If John is a good husband, then so is Peter'. I see the grammatical form as a device we evolved for exploring whether our overall set of attitudes and beliefs is defensible. Attitudes and beliefs do not come singly. We have whole families of them and the interrelations between members of this family bothers us. So, for instance if a politician thinks he must not tell lies, but that it is OK to break promises, he has a fracture in his attitudes that we might certainly deplore. We can do that by saying that if telling lies is wrong so is breaking promises, and trying to get him to feel the same way. We have predicates corresponding to attitudes everywhere. The football fan might sneer at Tottenham, or he might say 'Tottenham sucks'. They come to the same thing. He can't put a sneer into the antecedent of a conditional, sure enough, but he can say things like 'If Tottenham sucks then Everton is even worse'. But that's a poor argument for supposing that sucking is a new, somewhat mysterious property that a football team might have.

(RR) Well let's leave this logic-chopping. The real question is: who is to say that one person is right and another wrong? Where is truth in all this? Where is knowledge? Aren't you opening the door to soggy relativism?

(QR) First, who is to say? – we are! It is we ourselves who pose moral issues for ourselves and others, and it is up to us to find defensible solutions to them. Second, where is truth? You tell me what your issue is, and I will tell you where we say truth lies. Suppose your issue is whether one must give some percentage of income to charity. Well, if we decide we must, then that is where we think the truth lies, and if we decide we do not need to do so, then that is where we think the truth lies. When we cannot make up our minds then we do not know where truth lies, and shouldn't assert one thing or the other. There is no further question of truth, but of course the difficult thing to do is to decide the issue.⁸

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As for relativism, it is a mirage. Obviously in difficult cases people come to have different attitudes and make different choices. And sometimes we cannot make up our minds, and do not know what to feel or what to choose. At other times we may have a settled view, but be annoyingly unable to persuade other people. But we don't need to say, and indeed shouldn't say that 'they have their truth' or that 'truth divides equally between us' or anything like that. If we are settled in our own view, then we think that dissenters are wrong. If I think we ought to give at least 10% of our income to charity, and you say that we need not do so, then I

think you are wrong. Perhaps you are somewhere on the spectrum of ungenerosity and lack of charity, callous or unfeeling, which I deplore. If a relativist comes along and tries to say that we are both right (we each have 'our own truth') it is just a way of evading a decision. Where does he or she stand on giving 10 per cent to charity? I don't hear a useful contribution to that problem.

(Ex) Thank you, QR. I think exactly the same as you, and indeed have done so ever since reading David Hume and Adam Smith. But it needed spelling out for us to ward off the rotten tomatoes thrown by RR and his friends.

(QR) Yes, and it is interesting that there are so many tomatoes. I diagnose this as a hankering after authority. Once that was supposed to emanate from God. Dostoevsky said that if God is dead everything is permitted, but he was wrong: God may well be dead but you are not permitted to go more than 30 mph in built-up areas in England. Unfortunately, God's word is only available through dubious old texts and the sayings of self-proclaimed purveyors of it. But as St John himself said, there are many false prophets gone out into the world, and we only have to look at countries groaning under theological government to see what a mess that makes of things. Moral realism is a hangover, wanting the same metaphysics. It hankers after the cold marble tablets that churches provide, but without the religious trappings. It only really appeals because people are frightened of the burdens of having to choose how to feel and how to live. They want to be told, and pine after the cold marble tablets.

Notes

- ¹ Here RR is echoing G. E. Moore's famous 'Open Question' argument (Moore, 1903).
- ² The so-called Scottish sentimentalists, David Hume and Adam Smith, are ancestors of this view. Subsequent expressivists include Stevenson (1944), Gibbard (1992) and many others.
- ³ The view that the Second World War turned people away from expressivism is borne out by Iris Murdoch (1970; 1992). The view that reason leads us to moral truth is especially prominent in Derek Parfit's massive trilogy, *On What Matters* (2011–17). It was previously tried out for instance in Ralph Cudworth, *A Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality*, published posthumously in the early eighteenth century, and subsequently mocked by Hume.

- ⁴ This is the view defended in John Mackie's (1977) 'error theory'. But Mackie himself went on to moralize and grade and assess things quite cheerfully. Even trying to live without values itself involves values.
- ⁵ This objection to realism is especially developed by Max Hayward (2019).
- ⁶ This point has become known as my supervenience argument. An immaculate account of it is given in Mitchell (2017).
- ⁷ The problem with conditionals is known as the Frege-Geach problem, Geach (1965).
- ⁸ The idea that worrying about truth is just a distraction is known as the deflationary or minimalist theory of truth. I talk about this in Blackburn (2017).

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