

# Morality or Ethics: Real Differences or Mere Semantics?

## Abstracts

Monday 25 February 2013

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09:00 - 09:30: REGISTRATION

09:30 - 11:00: **Session 1: Introduction to the workshop: Ethics and Morals – Starting Points**

### **Introduction**

*Paul Reynolds (Edghe Hill University, UK)*

### **Morality or Ethics?**

*Bob Brecher (University of Brighton, UK)*

Having set out the context in which Bernard Williams developed the distinction between ‘morality’ and ‘ethics’ with which we are now familiar, I isolate the underlying issue concerned – a pessimism about, and distrust of, universalism. The issue, then, is this: is it possible that there be a universally valid moral principle, or principles (for example, of a Kantian sort)? Or must we be satisfied with (something like) sets of more or less local ethical practices? And if principles really are hopelessly passé, then, given that ‘ethics’ inevitably collapses, as MacIntyre argues, into more or less sophisticated sorts of etiquette when the specific ways of life that once might have underpinned them disappear, where does that leave us?. In short, if ethics is at best an empty shell and morality a rationalistic fantasy, should we not simply give up?

I shall finish by offering a simple proposal that counters such pessimism.

### **Whatever Works? From ‘Common Morality’ to ‘Global Ethics’**

*Tom Claes (Ghent University, Belgium)*

In 1993 Gene Outka & John Reeder edited a reader titled “Prospects for a Common Morality”. In their introduction they point to what they called the Janus-faced character of ‘recent moral and political thought.’ Moral philosophy seems to be wavering between the possibility of a ‘common morality’ on the one hand, and a loss of confidence in the very possibility of such a consensus. In concluding they sum up some questions they feel that deserve to figure prominently in the ‘future debate’ on ‘the Enlightenment paradigm’.

Some of these question and themes have indeed been debated vigorously the past two decades. What is striking, however, is that the language in which these discussions have been framed has changed dramatically since the mid-nineties. Talk of ‘global ethics,’ ‘a global ethic,’ ‘world ethos’ etc. has superseded talk about moral philosophy, morality and morals.

It is by no means always clear what is meant by this ‘global ethic(s)’ – what its procedures and content are. GE is often used in two interrelated meanings - one focusing on the global scope of morally/ethically relevant issues, one focusing on transformations in our dealings with these issues. Global ethics in the second sense harbours a promise of an ecumenical approach to moral/ethical problems and issues, productively accommodating cultural and social differences in moral/ethical outlook(s) without losing its moral bite. But is global ethics so defined nothing else but a camouflaged version of (cultural) relativism? Or has GE learned from earlier failures and can it succeed in successfully and productively evading particularism and localism?

Or, differently put: is the shift towards ‘global ethics’ indicative of a real change, or is it,

after all, mere semantics?

11:00 - 11:30: COFFEE BREAK

11:30 - 13:00: **Session 2: Morals and Ethics in Theory and Practice**

***Doing Workplace-Level Research in Northern Ireland: Reflexivity, Identity Work and Tandem Interviews***

*Gary Brown and Frank Worthington (University of Liverpool, UK)*

The article analyses the authors' reflexive account of the pragmatic insider/outsider identity work that emerged during a series of tandem interviews conducted during the fieldwork phase of a research project Northern Ireland. We demonstrate how insider and outsider identifications played a prominent role in the research process. The tandem interview strategy we employed was used to cultivate field roles familiar to interviewees, as a means of helping reduce the inevitable uncertainties that are common in social interactions with unknown researchers. Following Dundon and Ryan's (2010) recent account of similar experiences in conducting 'challenging' qualitative interviews with (potentially) 'reluctant' respondents, we seek to add weight to their claim that there are important lessons to be learned from how situations of this kind can be overcome. This paper seeks to encourage social science researchers to incorporate a greater degree of reflexivity into their accounts of research practices in the field, and to consider the potential ethical implications of ostensibly 'benign' qualitative research techniques. In essence, this paper offers a rare 'self-confessional' account of how taken-for-granted assumptions about certain qualitative interview methods are actually subtle forms of manipulation. We are (and were at the time) cognizant of the fact that some of our interview techniques, and the 'presentation of ourselves' to our research subjects, could be deemed manipulative. Whether or not it was in fact necessary to use such techniques, in light of the fact that there is no way of knowing whether or not the data we gathered was 'better', 'richer' and more 'detailed' for having done so, is open to question; whether or not we were unethical is also open to interpretation. Our moral and ethical justification (to ourselves!) for using such techniques is that we (at least) believe our research findings are of potential use-value for 'Post-Good-Friday' NI 'peace and reconciliation' policy makers charged with promoting and supporting means through which to overcome ethno-national community identity differences within the region.

***On the Meaning of Moral Value in Aristotle and R.M. Hare***

*Do Hyoung Kim (University of Edinburgh, Scotland)*

What is the nature of moral value? Or in what sense moral value can be distinctive from non-moral concept? I claim that Aristotle and R.M. Hare possess a significantly common structure in approaching these questions, although the difference between their theories on moral truth is rather heavy, i.e., the former is normally understood as a moral realist, and the latter as a relativist.

What I mean by the 'significantly common structure' between Aristotle and Hare can be expressed in the following way; (1) our unique mode of the cognition of moral value is a core point to distinguish moral value from non-moral concept, (2) that unique mode is a combination of the desiderative aspect and the intellectual, in our cognition of moral value, corresponding to the relevant elements in moral value, and (3) then, the elements indicate two heterogeneous senses in moral value itself; the motivational sense, that we desideratively cognize, and the conceptual sense, that we intellectually understand. Therefore, the essence of their commonness, if any, is that they share a common understanding on the dichotomy between these two senses, which is the distinctive nature of moral value.

In the paper, hence, I will first show how the dichotomy mentioned above can be commonly found in Aristotle and Hare, although they have their own terminologies, i.e., in Aristotle the motivational sense is moral excellence (ethike arête) and the conceptual sense is the right reason (orthos logos), whereas Hare labels the former with the prescriptive meaning and the latter the descriptive meaning. Furthermore, I will maintain that, because of their common understanding on the dichotomy, they can have a same solution for the notorious philosophical question on 'weakness of will'. Also, I will end this paper with a suggestion that Hare's idea of the prescriptive meaning of moral value can also help Aristotelian scholars to compose a more systemic interpretation on the nature of moral knowledge (phronesis).

13:00 - 14:00: LUNCH BREAK

14:00 - 15:30: **Session 3: Morality and Value**

***Morality Without Moralism***

*Morten Langfeldt Dahlback (Norwegian University of Science and Technology, NTNU, Norway)*

Is morality inherently moralistic? Morality – here understood as the cluster of ideas composing moral realism – has always been contested, and, since it rests on the thought that there are knowable moral truths, it has appeared open to charges of dogmatism. In this paper, I consider a challenge raised by Simon Blackburn against the viability of morality in the modern world. In his review of Derek Parfit's *On What Matters*, Blackburn argues that Parfit's rationalism violates the pluralist nature of the modern world, and that "[r]ationalism more readily consorts (...) with untroubled conviction that our own moral views are uniquely correct, so that other cultures that do not share them are (...) irrational and (...) best governed by us." Blackburn argues that realists have no reason to assume that their moral knowledge is true, and that this renders their claims dogmatic and moralizing at best, and at worst pernicious.

Against Blackburn's charges, I argue that morality is incompatible with ill-founded dogmatism and cultural chauvinism. Blackburn's charge rests on a misunderstanding of morality, including a misconception of its epistemological foundation, and is readily countered once we reject the analogy between moral knowledge and divine revelation and the elitist epistemology it implies. Drawing on work by Williamson and Cappelen, I argue that we should abandon the idea that moral knowledge is attained through intuition and claim that it is attained through reasoned judgment. This move allows us to claim that moral knowledge is accessible to all rational beings, a claim that is incompatible with the idea of privileged access underlying Blackburn's criticisms. On the contrary, it not only defeats this idea, but implies that morality, far from implying dogmatism, should be taken to imply a progressivist and moderately fallibilistic attitude towards received and established moral knowledge.

***What If We Were To Do Without "The Morality System"?***

*Geraldine Ng (University of Reading, UK)*

Bernard Williams considered *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* his most important work. Nonetheless, contemporary ethicists question the significance of its principle aim, that of mounting a sustained attack on "the morality system". The charges against it are that Williams's challenge is either deeply flawed, in that it misrepresents morality, or that it is not really of relevance today. However that question is to be answered, it shall not be attempted here. Even if his critique is flawed, this does not mean that his ethical account is not of independent interest as the development of a distinctive meta-ethical position in its own right. A more satisfactory way of approaching Williams's work, I believe, is to explore certain aspects of Williams's alternative to "the morality system". Morality is characterized (or mischaracterized) by its desire for a universalizing ethics that focuses on principles, injunctions, and standards that guide action. This aim of systemization neglects essential features of the wider sense of ethical life, the sense to be found in personal experience and social institutions. Williams depends on an account of moral phenomenology and psychology to fill in what is left out, redirecting ethics towards the individual. He draws our focus to the shape of an individual life and to the stance from which we must look. Williams offers a situated ethics to replace the morality system we are "better off without". Motivating this paper is the question: What if we were to do without the morality system? I end by considering the further question: Can we do without it?

15:30 - 16:00: COFFEE BREAK

16:00 - 17:30: **Session 4: Morality and Ethics: Radical Readings**

***Ethics Beyond Moralism – Exploring Alain Badiou's Thinking of The Ethical with Reference to an Irish Context of Political Education***

*Jones Irwin (Dublin City University, Ireland)*

The relatively recent 'return to the ethical' in Continentalist philosophy, primarily in the work of the later Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas has been much documented. Simultaneously, there has been a move in political and educational theory to revisit the 'virtue theory' of Aristotelian thought, influenced by, amongst others, Alisdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor and

Martha Nussbaum. While both of these trends are quite distinctive in themselves, they have come under attack from a more Lacanian orientation in political theory, which has accused them of a 'moralisation of the political' which reduces the latter to a more traditional scene of conscience and guilt. This latter critical move is associated most especially with the work of Chantal Mouffe.

In this presentation, I will explore a critique of these 'moralising' tendencies which, like Mouffe's work, takes its cue from the work of Jacques Lacan. Alain Badiou's philosophy explores the reactionary politics which often lurks behind so-called more emancipatory 'ethics', particularly as the latter versions evoke notions of the 'Good' or the 'True' or the 'Other'. In iconoclastic mode, Badiou in his seminal text *Ethics* (2001) seeks to reclaim the notion of the ethical in contradistinction to the previously mentioned positions. Invoking Lacan's Seminar VII, Badiou describes how a more psychoanalytically inflected ethics must begin 'with a repudiation of a certain idea of the Good'.

While acknowledging the provocative nature of this Badiouian ethics, my paper will explore both the theoretical and practical possibilities which such an approach can open up, with particular reference to some of the author's practical political-educational work in an Irish context.

### ***Ethics and Morals: A Marxist Reading***

*Paul Reynolds (Edge Hill University, UK)*

Critics generally make two errors in conceptualising a Marxist ethics or Marxist theory of morality. First, many non-Marxists and Marxists claim Marx says little about morality or that there is no ethics or theory of morality, and what he does say is inferior and undeveloped in contrast with classical and modern ethical theories. It is possible to see the work of Marxist, ex-Marxist and post-Marxist thinkers ranging from Fromm to Sartre to Heller to Macintyre as seeking to develop such a theory or concept. Second, some Marxists claim there is a Marxist ethics and it is critical to Marx's work, amongst which the Marxist Humanist school and those who privilege readings of the early Marx might be identified. Both are wrong.

Marx has a moral schema to his work, but for Marx it is indivisible from political economy and its abstraction is the fundamental error that is constituted by German idealism. The ethical schema within Marx recognises commodification, reification and objectification, as the roots of an intertwined alienation and exploitation, as both a moral and political economy problem simultaneously and dialectically, and the theory of value as having moral import as well as analytical import. For Marx, praxis and the entreaty to change the world as well as interpret it in the 11th Thesis on Feuerbach is a moral imperative as well as a political one, but since Marx would not recognise the separation of the two, the abstraction of ethics or morality is meaningless except for those moments in which it clarifies our understanding of the terms of change and development in class and capitalism.

This does not mean there are not critical problems with a Marxist morality, but it also reframes how we understand Marx and how we understand a Marxist contribution to moral and ethical debate, which provides an interrogative moment to conceptual abstractions and separations, institutional and political genealogies and assumptions in reasoning for moral guidance.

## **Tuesday 26 February 2013**

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09:30 - 11:00: **Session 5: Questioning Morals and Ethics**

### ***Brandom's normative inferentialism and its role in illuminating the morality/ethics flux***

*Irena Cronin (UCLA, USA)*

The purported stability of moral concepts and applied ethical standards, as well as their moral grounding, continues to be seriously and systematically questioned. Theories of moral relativism, though attractive due to their simplicity, are just not sufficient or accurate, and thus not helpful, in assessing the status of moral and ethical tenets. A good start in trying to get to the roots of these issues is to attempt to describe how a moral concept is utilized by human beings, that is, its pragmatic place and meaningfulness in society. This in no way precludes a theory of morality in a virtue ethical sense. In my paper, I apply Robert Brandom's theory of normative inferentialism to this end. In this way, a formal understanding of what is meant by the terms

moral concept and ethical standard, and their interplay, could be approached, and further questions in this area could be more finely tuned. One of my chief goals is to show how similarities in semantics using Brandom's theory infers "real" similarities, with regards to moral concepts and ethical standards in a formal sense.

### ***Two Levels of Justification and the Possibility of Conflicts and Critique***

*Emanuel John (Universität Potsdam and German Research Foundation, DFG, Poland)*

In my presentations I seek to inquire into the question how the norms a person sets in virtue of her rational capacities interrelates with the norms that govern her ethical practices and traditions. The main focus lies upon the question, how we have to conceive of the interrelation and order of the two sources of normativity, when justifying a person's actions and judgments as in accordance with or as opposing to one of them.

In the first part of my presentation I concentrate on discerning two types of generality, which I develop by following the Hegelian differentiation of morality and ethical life. First I characterize a notion of practical generality (Hegel's *Sittlichkeit*) as the normative standards shared by a certain community. However, a challenge thereby is to discern merely tribal from rational ethical communities. Concentrating on particular persons one rather talks about private values. In contrast, regarding a conception ideal generality (*Moralität*), I make sense of the rational capacity of a person to conceptualize an idea of goodness, which may be shared by all her conspecifics.

In the second part I argue that, differently than Hegel (resp. many of his interpreters) suggests, we shall not sublate the two types of generality into each other, but conceive of them as two categorically distinct but reciprocally related standards of justification. Within this reciprocal relation a person's critique as well as instructing her about her self-deception and retorting ideological claims can be justified.

In the concluding part I show that the framework, based on the two levels of generality provides an understanding of ethical practices and moral reasoning, which is not proceduralistic, but based on the way the two types of generalities inform each-other, when expressing justifications. Accordingly defects, conflicts, and criticism is analyzed within this framework.

11:00 - 11:30: COFFEE BREAK

11:30 - 13:00: **Session 6: Liberalism, Neo-Liberalism and Morality**

### ***Non-Liberal Norms: Moral, Ethical, or What?***

*Dan Demetriou (University of Minnesota, Morris, USA)*

Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt (2012) argues that all cultural mores are grounded upon a handful of innate "moral foundations." Haidt claims his research shows that Western liberals shrink the realm of the "moral" down to care- and (contractarian) justice-based concerns. Worldwide, however, purity-, authority-, and loyalty-based norms are also moralized.

I wish to explore and evaluate various strategies of philosophical response. First is rejectionism: the view saying that since these non-liberal norms are not genuine, there is no need to revise the Western philosopher's usual sense of what counts as "moral" one (cf. Bernard Gert's Stanford Encyclopedia entry for "morality"). Rejectionism is inadequate, since the question is what counts as a putative moral norm, not a genuine moral norm. Segregationism, a more interesting reply, would give Haidt's non-liberal foundations the second-class status of being "ethical" (as opposed to "moral") norms. This strategy has recently been used by Kwame Appiah (2010) to categorize norms of honor.

To avoid the previous objection, the best versions of this reply will first establish (as Appiah does) formal, morally non-substantive distinctions between the "moral" and "ethical." Interestingly, even fairly strict non-substantive conceptions of the moral will not keep out the non-liberal norms social scientists ask us to consider. For instance, anthropologists and cultural psychologists (Richard Shweder, Paul Rozin) present the purity ethic as systematizing universal, necessary, trumping, practical norms. And honor—even on Appiah's understanding of both honor and morality—turns out to be a moral value, since it satisfies these four conditions along with two others sometimes associated with moral norms, viz., that they are necessarily social and determine what we owe to others. I thus conclude that the only principled non-parochial position is accommodationism, which recognizes non-liberal norms as putatively moral, although quite possibly non-genuine.

Using the example of post Bretton Woods finance, my paper seeks to interrogate the relationship between the notion of compliance, as commonly used in the regulation of financial services, professional ethics and notions of morality. There is something of a continuum in these concepts with compliance seen as akin to obedience to set of rules, and professional or business ethics along with morality occupying a different - perhaps higher realm. In a complex and interconnected marketplace, in the main, occupied by powerful hierarchical organisations - the space afforded to morality is extremely limited. Highly liquid notions of responsibility which encompass (or refer to) such phenomena as the market itself and the intrinsic nature of financial instruments themselves further problematize ideas of moral agency. Recent (over two decades or so) developments such as disintermediation and indeed securitisation effectively strip out relationships from the financial transactions whilst at the same time shortening the time horizons of market participants. In this context, the idea of doing the right thing has been reduced to fulfilling one compliance obligations. This reductive tendency has in the first instance undermined the saliency of professional ethics and this in turn further constricted the space that might be occupied by moral agency. Rather than being “an empty formulae”, professional or applied ethics functioned as a place where reflection was possible and where time could be afforded to moral problems. At the time of writing this abstract I am picturing the professional ethic in the banking or insurance sector as chapel. A frequent lament I hear in my work in the field of applied ethics within the financial sector is “this used to be a profession now it’s just a business”. They are missing their chapel and perhaps their vestments.

13:00 - 14:00: LUNCH BREAK

14:00 - 15:30: **Session 7: Roundtable – Thinking Ethics and Morals**

This session will be a roundtable. It will operate as follows:

- Throughout the workshop, which takes place in the same room, we will have a flipchart available, and at the end of each session you are invited to note down key themes and issues that you feel have been raised.
- For the roundtable, we will display all these flipchart sheets as mem-coms, and pursue a chaired discussion of short interventions seeking to build a sense of engagement with resonances, dissonances, consistencies, conflicts and contradictions in these themes and issues. This will form the basis for a short report document that we will circulate in the post-conference period.

15:30 - 16:00: **Closing Comments /Looking Forward**