

Making Sense of Ethics in the Everyday

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To inquire into the foundation of some area of discourse or practice is often a matter of trying to establish the meanings of the key terms that figure within it – although it is to be noted that this need not involve ‘definition’ in the traditional sense, but might require, instead, the exploration of the connections between the terms at issue and their interconnection within the wider semantic or conceptual network to which they belong. In the case of ethics, as well as normative discourse more broadly, this would presumably mean that the any inquiry into the foundations of ethics ought to entail an inquiry into the ‘meanings’ of – or the semantic and conceptual interconnections between – basic ethical and normative terms. Something like this task has indeed been traditionally taken as constitutive of so-called ‘meta-ethics’.

Richard Rorty has claimed, however, that the meaning of basic normative terms such as ‘good’, ‘just’ and ‘true’ is really a problem only for philosophers – that we all know what these terms are well enough for the uses they serve, and do not need philosophers to explain their meanings.¹ On the one hand, one might such a claim to mean that, that from the perspective of ordinary discourse and practice, ethics is in no need of philosophical foundation at all – meta-ethics would appear, rather like traditional metaphysics, as something to be ‘overcome’ rather than continued. On the other, it might be said that this very claim entails a very particular kind of foundation – even if one that stands apart from foundation in the usual sense. On this latter reading, ethics already carries its own ‘foundation’ with it – a foundation given in ethical practice itself, although exactly how such a practice could supply its own foundation remains to be explained.² The

approach that I want to sketch here, and to some extent defend, has some affinities with Rorty's position, although it also diverges from it in some important respects. Broadly 'phenomenological' or 'hermeneutical' in character, it is an approach that seeks to find the ground of our practices in the practices themselves (a move that is suggested by, as well as expressed in, the idea of hermeneutical circularity, as well as by the concern with the transcendental³); an approach that, in more explicitly phenomenological terms, looks to the genuine phenomena of ethical life as the basis for ethical reflection and explication.

Like Rorty, although perhaps not to quite the same extreme, I have become somewhat suspicious of many of the attempts of philosophers to analyse and explain some of our most basic concepts. In many cases, especially when it comes to basic normative terms, terms like 'right', 'good' or 'true', it seems that much philosophical (and even some phenomenological) analysis has come to operate at something of a remove from the everyday practices in which these terms are embedded. As a result, much of what we, as philosophers, say about ethics, for instance, tends not to connect with, nor to have much impact upon, our ordinary lives – not even those salient aspects of ordinary life in which we find ourselves in especially difficult or demanding situations. I suspect this is true even of many philosophers who often seem to conduct their lives in ways little different from the ways of non-philosophers – something that might be thought to be confirmed by some recent empirical research.⁴

This seems to me to be a point brought home when we consider the problem of trying to talk to people about ethics in contexts removed from the usual philosophy classroom situation – to a group of young police cadets about ethical practice in policing, for instance, or a meeting of senior public service managers about ethical conduct in management. In neither of these cases is it of much help to talk about the sorts of meta-ethical considerations that often preoccupy philosophers. Yet in both cases, the individuals concerned are regularly engaged with ethical matters, and sometimes with

quite serious matters, even matters of life and death. Moreover, in both cases, the audiences concerned will already have and will often express quite strong views on ethical matters, even while they may also be keen to gain ethical advice and guidance.

It seems to me that any approach to ethics, and I suspect this is true for philosophy in general, that is indeed adequate to providing an account of ethics and of ethical practice needs to begin with the everyday ethical situations in which we find ourselves. It must be formulated in ways that are relevant to those situations, and that also connect with our ordinary discourse about them. This means that the accounts we offer ought to make sense, and find some purchase in the situations that are familiar to police cadets and public service managers, among others, as well as in the sorts of personal and family situations that are common to all of us. Moreover, if this is where our ethical thinking begins, then it must also be that to which it is always tied back, and by reference to which its adequacy must be assessed. Indeed, one might say that, when it comes to phenomenological thinking about ethics, this is precisely what it means to go back *zu den Sachen selbst* – to the things themselves, to the real matters at issue.

If we begin in the everyday practice of ethics, then what must draw our attention are not those high-profile issues that are so often at the centre of many public discussions of ethics, and with respect to which there is the most disagreement (those that concern, for instance, abortion, gene-technology, or euthanasia),⁵ but rather a set of everyday values and commitments that are actually the focus for widespread agreement. For the most part these values and commitments relate to the manner in which we engage with one another, as well as with ourselves and the wider world, as part of our ordinary, everyday activities. These are actually the values and commitments that figure in almost every code of conduct or statement of ethics – including trust, honesty, respect, accountability and so on – and they are also the values and commitments that most often figure in our everyday discourse. It is worth noting that these values and commitments are also remarkably robust in the

face of individual and especially community differences. What differs is not so much the commitment to these values as such, as the way they are understood to play out in different contexts. Thus a basic commitment to honesty seems to be widespread even though what counts as honesty in particular cases may vary.

There is an obvious explanation for the robustness of these basic values and commitments: while there will always be differences in *socialisation*, the very possibility of *sociality* as such depends on what does not differ, namely, the commitment to the maintenance of those structures and principles that enable individuals to exist in appropriate relations to one another, and it is just those relations that are at issue in basic ethical commitments such as expressed in terms of honesty, respect and so on. Why just these commitments rather than others – why should honesty, for instance, be privileged here rather than, for instance deceit? The reason again is relatively simple: because those values and commitments that we take to be properly ethical are those that enable the maintenance of relations with self, with others, and with the world in a way that is both sustainable in the long-term and that is also supportive of the entire network of relationships and the commitments that underpin it. Thus deceitfulness, for instance, proves not to be viable as a foundational value since it proves impossible to maintain a consistent system of relations with self, with others, and with the wider world that is indeed based on the prioritization of deceit over honesty.

The picture of ethics and its foundations that begins to emerge here is one that can be confirmed by looking to the actual constitution of our ethical and evaluative lives. In spite of the fact that the avowal of some form of ethical relativism – according to which ethics is taken to vary according to individual conscience, life-style, cultural background or whatever – is widespread within many contemporary societies, the reality of our ethical practice seems to run counter to such avowals. For the most part, individual lives remain centred on the relationships – especially those relating to self, family and friends, but including more general civic and community relations

- that are integral to those lives and that give shape and direction to them. This is evident, not only through examination of what people actually do and the decisions they make, but it can also be brought to light through certain forms of reflection, especially reflection undertaken in company with others, that is directed, in the first instance, not at the immediate identification of particular ethical principles as such, but instead at the underlying structures out of which ethical principles and commitments emerge.

Thus if one takes almost any group of individuals, even those who initially evince scepticism about ethics or adherence to some form of ethical relativism, and ask them to identify just one aspect of their lives that is most important to them and that is most directly relevant in their actions and decision, they will invariably tend towards an answer that gives priority to their *relationships* - sometimes the relation to *self* (in the form of self-respect or self-esteem) or to *world*, but most often to *others* (to family, friends, colleagues and the wider community).⁶ Indeed, even those who may be inclined first to identify such things as freedom or health as the key aspects of their lives, will almost always, on further reflection, acknowledge these as important primarily because of what they enable, rather than being valuable in themselves - and what they enable is typically identified in terms of relationships with other human beings. What determines the basic values and commitments in most human lives are thus the relationships within which those lives are embedded and that give content to those lives. Ethics may be said, on such an account to be essentially concerned with the structures that establish and sustain such relationships.

Trust, honesty, respect, accountability, and other such ethical notions, refer us to modes of conduct, aspects of character, and forms of commitment or obligation that play central roles in the establishment and maintenance of the relationships that are constitutive of human lives - and not merely of humans lives as lived within certain cultures or societies, but of human lives as such. The correlation of the ethical with the relational here is especially noteworthy, since it indicates that ethics is not underpinned by some notion

of the autonomous, 'rational' subject, but rather by the essential interconnectedness of subjects within a larger world. Such a 'relational' conception of human being derives, so I would argue, from the very nature of human identity as well as human meaning as based in our necessary relatedness to the things, persons and environmental circumstances in which our lives are embedded, and that provide the very substance and fabric of those lives. This is a view of human being that seems to me already evident in the work of a number of key thinkers within the phenomenological and hermeneutic traditions, from Husserl to Gadamer, although it is also clearly present in the work of Donald Davidson – a thinker whose work, as I have argued over many years now, is best understood as essentially hermeneutic in its character and orientation.⁷

A key point that follows from the sort of relational position that I am suggesting here is that it involves a commitment to human being, whether viewed from an ethical, epistemic, or ontological perspective as based in the irreducible experience of experience of plurality and otherness. The plurality that emerges here is, of course, a plurality of subjects or of persons, but it is also a plurality of principles, commitments and obligations. Such plurality follows from the relatedness that is constitutive of human life and being. Such relatedness means that while, on the one hand, human life is a constant drawing together of diverse elements, it is also a constant differentiating of those same elements. Unity and difference, singularity and plurality, go together here in the same way as do subjectivity and sociality.

This emphasis on ethical commitments as those that underpin a systematic structure that integrates both a plurality of persons and a plurality of different commitments is a particularly important point, since my claim here is not that any and every relationship-enabling commitment nor indeed any and every relationship can be viewed as properly ethical in character. There are many relationships – that between master and slave is a notable example, as is that of bully to victim, along with many other asymmetrical relationships that involve some form of exploitation – that are clearly not

ethically acceptable or that are based in unethical modes of conduct. The problem with these latter cases is not that they may not be able to be sustained for long periods (even blackmailers may retain their hold over their victim for decades), but rather that they are parasitic upon other commitments, and stand within a larger structure of relationships with which they are also in tension. That this is so is indicated by the way in which such relationships invariably depend on fear, violence and often deceit, and, in the case of slavery, on widespread practices of segregation and de-humanization, and often of social disruption through war or conquest, in order that they be maintained.

The way in which ethical commitments operate to found domains of personal, social and worldly engagement is itself indicative of something characteristic of the structure of normativity, but which is often overlooked. Norms are typically constitutive of the domains within which they also apply. Honesty and respect, for instance, open up and establish a certain sort of personal and social space, and within that space honesty and respect can be appealed in the regulation of conduct, may be expressed in specific actions and institutional forms, while some actions and institutional forms may also operate in ways inconsistent with those norms. This does not, however, mean that there is some problem that attaches to the claim that such norms are indeed foundational of the domain in which they apply. A norm may well be foundational in the way described, and yet that need not imply that it completely determines behaviour; certain values or commitments may provide the ground for personal, social and worldly engagement, and yet not every instance of behaviour will be consistent with those values and commitments.

The general point at issue here is simple: norms can always be broken in any individual case and yet they cannot fail to obtain for the most part and as a whole. This is just what it is for something to be normative. This feature of normativity is itself indicative of a significant point of difference between behaviour that is based on norms and the sort of rule-governed behaviour

that characterises game-play – the latter being taken, all too often, as having a structure analogous to that of normativity. In a game, the rules of the game cannot be broken, not even in a single instance, without also breaking the game – the game is thereby exhibited as always being parasitic upon a larger system of practices. In the case of properly ethical norms or commitments that found an entire domain of social life, however, the failure to abide by some norm or commitment in any one case is not sufficient to disrupt the domain as a whole – and the reason for this is that, in a certain sense, the ethical norm applies to regulate the breach, rather than to normalise the observance, with the reverse holding in relation to the rules of a game.

Notice that approaching questions of ethics in this way gives rise to some important consequences. One of these is something that I touched on briefly in the discussion above, namely, the essential plurality of the ethical – a plurality that can also be understood, however, in terms of its *indeterminacy*. Because the commitments that are part of the structure of normativity apply to the system as a whole and because they will be sensitive to the whole, there cannot be any simple univocal specification of that in which they consist (as a general point, I would argue that normativity is thus not to be understood as a matter of some priorly established and univocal *rules*). There will be an indeterminacy to ethical adjudication and interpretation that follows from the relational or holistic character of the system itself. This means that there will always be more than one way to describe a situation – which does not mean that we cannot distinguish between right and wrong, but that we may differ in how we describe this difference. As an aside, I would note that this seems to me to create difficulties for those who want to engage in the supposedly ‘experimental’ study of ethics – our ethical judgments depend on our other judgments, and how we judge is highly sensitive to how we describe situations. The difficulty in attempting to study ethical judgment and description empirically or experimentally is that we cannot easily determine the descriptions under which our subjects approach particular situations nor be confident that their descriptions are ours, or, at least, we can only do this as

part of a broader set of interactions and in a way that is always highly dependent on the particularities of the cases at issue.

There is another, and perhaps more important, issue that emerges here. The account I have been offering is, as I am sure has already become evident, an essentially *rationalist* one. On the account I have offered, ethics is a matter of constantly adjusting our behaviour and judgment to take account of the overall judgments and actions within which particular judgments and actions are embedded – and on which, I might add, they depend for their meaning and significance. The process is very similar to that of trying to work out a interpretation manual for a foreign language or of finding one’s way around an unfamiliar place without a map. Rather than *impose* a pattern *onto* the singular utterances or locations with which we are faced, we draw the pattern out of those utterances or locations through our interaction with them. I would suggest that this is not only what we do in ethical reasoning, as well as in linguistic or topographic orientation and elaboration, but in philosophy in general. Indeed, it is this that is exemplified in the elenctic method found in the Socratic dialogues that aims at rendering our beliefs consistent through the dialogic engagement between interlocutors and between ideas – a method discussed independently by both Hannah Arendt and Donald Davidson, and that each takes to exemplify a key feature of thinking as such, namely, that in thinking we look to articulate meaning through the articulation of the relation between ideas.⁸ This can be seen to assert a conception of reason as itself the working out of connection rather than the application of any rule, as well as the essentially plural and relational character of meaning, thought and content – a relationality and rationality that is evident in the ethical no less than any other aspect of human life.

The conception of reason that is invoked here is, however, a ‘thin’ conception, or as I would prefer to say a modest conception (in fact I would argue that all of our key concepts are modest in this way). It does not appeal to a reason as a monolithic structure that holds imperial sway over ethics, or over any other domain, but refers us instead to a notion of reason as

consisting in the indeterminate relatedness of any such domain. All 'holistic' accounts are, it seems to me, rationalist in this way – they also remain opposed to irrationalist and relativistic accounts through their rejection of any notion of completeness or determinacy that attaches to the 'whole', to the larger 'system' of which individual judgments, actions, or whatever are an element (although this is a point often overlooked). On this account, ethical deliberation, which can be understood as a constant process of equilibration, as well as reason, is progressive, but it is also re-descriptive, and in this respect the sense in which it is progressive is itself always open to question and to re-interpretation.

Like Simon Blackburn, but perhaps for slightly different reasons, I would argue that there is no 'empire' that belongs to reason,⁹ and the territory of ethics is no mere province of it, and yet there is nevertheless a landscape to which reason belongs, and in which ethics is itself located. Reason, we might say, is the name we give to the character of the landscape as a landscape, that is, as a single integrated terrain of places, spaces, and locales, that can be given a multiplicity of different mappings that are different and yet remain mappings of the 'same' landscape. Reason names this 'sameness', it names the implicit integrity that is constitutive of the landscape. Inasmuch as this integrity resides in the landscape – it would not be a landscape without it – so it also resides in the mappings that we articulate, and in the structural unity that we uncover.

If it is indeed the case that we already know the meaning of basic normative terms such as 'good', 'just' and 'true', then what role can the philosopher play here? Is the philosopher an unneeded interloper who only confuses and confounds rather than illuminates? What is the character of thinking such that it has any place here?

We can only engage in philosophy if we already know that into which we inquire. This is one of the key lessons of phenomenological and hermeneutic thinking. Yet what we know, we do not always know well, and we do not always know it in a way such that we can reflect upon it.

Philosophy is nothing if not a mode of reflexivity, and a means to enable and support such reflexivity. It is the capacity for such reflection, which I would suggest is identical with the capacity for self-questioning, that founds a characteristically human form of life – it is thus that Heidegger identifies Dasein as that mode of being whose own being is constantly in question for it, an idea that continues into his later thinking in terms of the task of thinking as one that is always before us. When it come to matters of ethics, then the capacity for reflection, and the capacity for self-questioning, is particularly central. What typically sustains and supports unethical conduct, at almost every level, is an unwillingness to consider the possibility that one could be mistaken in one's actions and in the attitudes that underpin those actions, and an evident willingness to give in to rationalisation and self-justification. Moreover, the failure of reflection and the triumph of rationalisation is aided and supported by isolation and self-obsession – the more one is cut off from the essential relationality in which ethical concerns most naturally emerge, then the more likely it is that one will fail to question one's thoughts and actions, the more likely one will fail to attend to the ethical context in which one is inevitably embedded.

There is a view, widespread even among many phenomenologists, that we are most properly 'in' the world when we act in a way that is directly 'attuned' to the world such that thought or reflection becomes irrelevant or even disruptive of that attunement. Yet while our being always already "in the world" is indeed the basis for all our modes of thought and action, it would be a mistake to take this as incompatible with the centrality of reflection. Certainly, in the case of ethical practice, as in the case of philosophical thought as such, the capacity to engage in the open space of questionability that is also the space of the opening of world is the very basis on which ethics itself, as well as philosophy, first appears.

Notes and references

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- ¹ Richard Rorty in Richard Rorty and Pascal Engel, *What's the Use of Truth?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p.45.
- ² The problem concerning foundation that is at issue here is not peculiar to ethics, but instead represents a quite general philosophical problem. Similarly, the resolution of the problem sketched here is merely the particular application in an ethical context of an approach that has much broader philosophical significance.
- ³ See my discussion of the relation between the hermeneutic and transcendental in 'The Transcendental Circle', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 75 (1997), pp.1-20; see also my 'Ground, Unity, and Limit' in *Heidegger and the Thinking of Place* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2012), pp.73-96.
- ⁴ See, for instance, the research conducted by Eric Schwitzgebel and Joshua Rust including (among other papers): Joshua Rust and Eric Schwitzgebel, 'The Moral Behavior of Ethicists and the Power of Reason', in Hagop Sarkissian and Jennifer Cole Wright (eds.), *Advances in Experimental Moral Psychology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp.91-109, and Eric Schwitzgebel, 'The Moral Behavior of Ethicists and the Role of the Philosopher' (2014), in Christoph Luetge, Hannes Rusch, and Matthias Uhl (eds.), *Experimental Ethics: Towards an Empirical Moral Philosophy* (London: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2014), pp.59-64.
- ⁵ Significantly in the work undertaken by UNESCO, especially its ethics and technology division, directed at the development of ethics education and of ethical codes and guidelines, a basic guiding principle has been to focus on those areas of ethics in which there is most agreement, rather than on issues where there is less. The hope is that by building on what is already shared and uncontentious there is more chance of making progress across the entire spectrum of issues.
- ⁶ Significantly, these three dimensions, which I take to be the three basic dimensions of ethical life, are also identified by Davidson as the three basic dimensions that make for the possibility of content or meaning (see Davidson, 'Three Varieties of Knowledge', in *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001, pp.205-20), and that he describes in terms of subjectivity, intersubjectivity and objectivity; in early Heidegger they appear as the three worldly dimensions of human life (see for instance, Heidegger's discussion of "Der Weltcharakter des Lebens", in Heidegger, *Grundprobleme der Phenomenologie* [1919/1920], *Gesamtausgabe* 58, Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1993, p.33) in terms of *Umwelt* ("surrounding-world"), *Mitwelt* ("with-world"), and *Selbswel* ("self-world"). See my broader discussion of this matter in 'Self, Other, Thing: Triangulation and Topography in Post-Kantian Philosophy', *Philosophy Today*, 59 (2015), pp.103-126.
- ⁷ See, for instance, my discussion in 'Topology, Triangulation, and Truth', *Heidegger and the Thinking of Place*, pp.199-224.

⁸ See Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1978, one-volume edn). pp.166-193; Davidson, 'The Socratic Method of Truth', *Truth, Language, and History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), pp.241-250..

⁹ Simon Blackburn, in 'Reason's Empire', Gifford lectures 2003-2004, University of Glasgow.