

The Evolution of Moral Thought

Last week we looked at three of the most influential positions in moral philosophy and examined the similarities and differences between them and their respective relationships with the development of scientific thought. We ended by discussing the relationship between moral thought and blame.

On the whole, philosophical reflection on the nature of ethical thought has largely centred on whether or not there are moral facts. If there are, how they can be determined? If there are not, then the thought is that moral judgements are no more than a matter of deeply held personal opinion. Moral realists – i.e. those who believe there are moral facts – have adopted various kinds of method to rationalise moral judgments in such terms (we looked at Aristotle's Virtue Ethics, Kant's deontological approach and Mill's Utilitarian method)

This kind of philosophical division between realist and irrealist approaches is similar to the methodology of science, insofar as we are either in a position to know about moral rights and wrongs (if they can be established independently of what any individual happens to think) or not. The idea being that if there are moral facts, then they can be truth-valued in much the same way as scientific facts and, as such, yield propositional content; if they cannot be truth-valued in such ways, then (it is thought) the best we can do is to seek some kind of pragmatic foundation for our values if they are to have any kind of substance.

But is this the only way in which we conceive of moral thought as operating? Our discussion of Sophocles' tragedy *Oedipus Rex* suggested otherwise. We discussed whether or not morality was merely answerable to blame and it became apparent that this was not so (at least at the moment!).

Were it the case that the foundations of moral thought are rooted in an ability to blame someone for what they have done then, in cases such as that which befell Oedipus, there would be no possibility of the tragedy that emerges and that Sophocles invites us to recognise. That we do recognise it and that such recognition is interdependent with our understanding of it as tragedy is a form of being moved to pity Oedipus that is not only expressive of how we have fixed him morally in relation to what has happened, but also answerable to how he has morally held himself in relation to what he has done.

None of that (and much more besides) would be possible if moral judgement was only tied to whether or not we could blame someone for what they had done. Put another way, it is the form that our thought takes (as well as that of Oedipus) in relation to such things – the unavoidability of the responsiveness that we have to it – which is constitutive and expressive of our conception of its focus and, as such, also the grammatical foundations of our moral concepts.

Put another way, to refuse to fix Oedipus in a morally severe light (as someone who, among other things, married his mother) because one cannot blame him is a refusal to acknowledge certain forms of meaning and what they are expressive of. This is borne out further in the following example provided by Bernard Williams (late husband of the Liberal peer Baroness Williams).

The lorry driver who, through no fault of his, runs over a child, will feel differently from any spectator, even a spectator next to him in the cab, except perhaps to the extent that the spectator takes on the thought that he himself might have prevented it, an agent's thought. Doubtless, and rightly, people will try, in comforting him, to move the driver from this state of feeling, move him indeed from where he is to something more like the place of a spectator, but it is important that this is seen as something that should need to be done, and indeed some doubt would be felt about a driver who too blandly or readily moved to that position. We feel sorry for the driver, but that sentiment co-exists with, indeed presupposes, that there is something special

about his relation to this happening, something which cannot merely be eliminated by the consideration that it was not his fault. It may be still more so in cases where agency is fuller than in such an accident, though still involuntary through ignorance. (Williams, B. 1981. p.28)

Were it the case that the blameless lorry driver felt stricken with guilt over what had happened but then happily walked away from the incident after being comforted by others wishing to alleviate his guilty suffering by telling him he was not to blame, we would suspect a lack of moral seriousness in him. Indeed, there would be good reason to think that he was blind to certain kinds of meaning or lacking in consideration of the moral context of which he was a part and, thus, unable to judge what is and is not a genuinely moral context.

In other words, to suggest that the driver's guilt is merely a psychological reaction that can be wholly alleviated by showing him that he could not be blamed for what happened (in the same way as one might try to get someone over a fear of flying by appealing to the low crash statistics) fails to be sensitive to what it means for the driver to feel guiltless. That, of course, as Williams points out, does not mean that others should not feel the need to comfort him; but it is a requirement of moral seriousness (and its recognition) that such comfort is necessary and understood as comfort, rather than an attempt to persuade him against the meaning of the situation (and that his guilt is foolish). It is also internal to (and a further foundation of) the character of the moral landscape that it is intelligible as such.

But, of course, all this is expressive of how human beings are disposed to think – there are our natural responses to one another and to the world more generally and how we are disposed to think about them. Answerable to these dispositions, there are mistakes in logic that we ignore and mistakes that we readily point out. Let us take a couple of examples of mistakes in logic that, at least at present, we are disposed to ignore.

The first involves the notion of cause and effect. If, for example, I say that x caused y I am expressing a hypothesis – something that can, in principle at least, be wrong and, therefore, about which I can be wrong. This returns us to scientific thought for a moment. By contrast, something about which I cannot be right or wrong in principle is not a hypothesis and, therefore, not something I can specify as a cause. Thus, when I give reasons for my actions – when I say “This is why I acted as I did” my reasons cannot (logically) be the causes as my actions – I cannot, even in principle, be wrong about what my reasons are. They might be bad reasons or poorly thought through but they are still my reasons and I cannot be wrong about them being my reasons. Later, of course, I might change my mind and replace my former reasons with new ones - I might even say that my former reasons caused me to act in a certain way that I now regret but about this I would be wrong; whatever reasons I gave (or now give), they are the rationalisation of my actions but not their cause. Rather, both old and new reasons are an expression of the orientation of the thought of the person whose reasons they are.

The second example is directly related to the first. A person who cites religious reasons for executing people who are of a different or no religion are not citing causes of their behaviour; rather they are rationalising it. The orientation of their thought is that of a killer but one cannot cite the reasons that they give as a cause of that orientation. One can say something similar about the political reasons people give for their actions – they demonstrate a particular disposition but are not the causes of that disposition.

This has significant implications in terms of the ways in which we understand human behaviour. Firstly, it begs the question: if our reasons are not the causes of our actions, then what is? In the first instance, one might answer that it is our dispositions, which is certainly a plausible explanation. But what about the changes that our individual and collective thinking undergoes over time? Why do both our individual and collective dispositions change? There is, for example, nothing that compels human beings to be violent towards one another because they have different religious beliefs even though it is religious doctrine that provides the reasons given as for it. Reasons are not physical

causes after all (unlike viruses that can be cited as a cause of delirium). The reasons given for their individual and collective actions are not the causes of an increase in global unrest; nevertheless, there must be a cause to which it is accountable.

Similarly, a joke, poem, painting or piece of music can either become outlandish (which, of course, is an evaluative moral term) or accepted – take, as an example of the latter, D.H. Lawrence’s novel *Lady Chatterly’s Lover*; of the former, there are jokes that were socially acceptable 40 years ago but which could now carry a possible criminal conviction if made in public.

One possible objection to the idea that reasons cannot be causes runs as follows: the reason that objects fall back to the ground when they are thrown in the air is gravity – in other words, gravity is the reason (and cause) of objects returning to the ground. However, in this case, we are using the term reason in a different way; we are taking it to be synonymous with a legitimate use of the notion of cause and, as such, a legitimate hypothesis. The concept of reason can, as such, function in different ways but it is not always the case that reasons can be logically specified as causes.

Thus, it becomes much more problematic to say that, for example, religion causes wars since religious reasons cited for such violence are rationalisations of human behaviour, as opposed to genuine cause and effect hypotheses. This is a thought that has almost no cultural traction however, which is why I use it as an example of a case in which logic is overlooked. Nevertheless, in embracing the thought that religion causes wars we are quite ready to exploit logical failures in religious justification (and the reasoning internal to it) in order to criticise those with religious beliefs.

All of this is answerable to our evolution – we are, in the end, evolved creatures like any other. Among the characteristics that are unique to our species is the ability to engineer to an advanced level (the internal combustion engine is one such example) and to develop sophisticated systems of ethics. But it is perhaps less clear to what extent the reasons that we give for our actions have determined the direction that such cognitive evolution has taken.

If we return to the idea of blame we can perhaps see now that it is far from inconceivable that the nature of our moral thought will change in ways that allow blame to become the ultimate arbiter in terms of where we locate someone morally. The implications for the idea of justice are, of course, tremendous but I think we are seeing an embryonic form of change in this direction with the way in which politics is taking place in the United States.

Bibliography

Williams, B. *Moral Luck*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge. 1981