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The goods and the persons they are goods for

After some reflections on style in contemporary anglophone philosophy, I dig a little deeper, and explore what that style is a symptom of — which I suggest is a kind of blindness to the importance of the second-personal in ethics. I develop the notion of the second-personal with reference to Levinas and Darwall; and I show some of the explanatory potential of that notion by looking again at divine-command ethics.

Science deals exclusively with things as they are in themselves; and art exclusively with things as they affect the human sense and human soul. Her work is to portray the appearances of things, and to deepen the natural impressions which they produce upon living creatures. The work of science is to substitute facts for appearances, and demonstrations for impressions. Both, observe, are equally concerned with truth; the one with truth of aspect, the other with truth of essence. Art does not represent things falsely, but truly as they appear to mankind. Science studies the relations of things to each other; but art studies only their relations to man.

John Ruskin, *Stones of Venice* 11.47-8

We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics.

Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et infini* 1.A4, p.43 in Lingis translation

It cannot be an insignificant feature of contemporary anglophone moral philosophy that it so studiously evades the question of style. The ideal is supposed to be clarity, of course. But in practice, and given the extreme stylistic obscurity that in fact characterises quite a lot of anglophone ethics, it might be more accurate to say that typically the writing of this school displays a certain antiseptic anonymity.

Arthur Danto exaggerates when he says somewhere that analytic philosophers aim to write in such a way that you can't tell who's writing. *Some* analytic authors' styles are pretty easy to spot— Jerry Fodor, Saul Kripke, Derek Parfit, Gerry Cohen, Danto himself if he counts as analytic. Still, there is a truth in his hyperbole. Maybe the stars in philosophy are allowed their foibles, just as Feynman and Einstein were allowed theirs because they were star physicists. Those of us at a lowlier level should not presume we have earned such indulgences. For us no exception is allowed from the basic general rule, which is to subordinate ourselves to an ideal for writing-style according to which the aim seems to be, by making the writer

impersonally invisible, to make the writing unchallengeably objective; or at any rate peer-reviewably anonymous. The ideal of clarity is at least pursued in this sense, that the author, in the best case, will become a transparent (and therefore invisible) medium for the thought.

As my Einstein-Feynman comparison hints, the ideal we are talking about here is, of course, originally and basically an ideal for scientific writing. The ideal is *impersonal*, in a double sense. As already noted, it abstracts away from the writer, the “voice” speaking. (Strikingly, in some scientific writing, such as descriptions of laboratory experiments, this abstraction from the author is conveyed by the use of the impersonal passive.) It also abstracts away from the reader, the audience. The writing style seems designed to obscure, not just who the writing is *by*, but also who the writing is *for*: who is being addressed. (If you want to see clear examples of this kind of writing, look at any recent number of any leading anglophone ethics journal. You will find other things too, of course; but you will find examples of what I mean.) Obviously there is some simple sense in which the audience for such writing is simply other academic ethicists—if anyone. But here “if anyone” does not seem an idle addition. At a deeper level, the aim seems to be just what it might be for a mathematician: simply that some system of propositions should be *presented as true*. Such an approach really does abstract away from the audience. If it has an answer to the question “Who are you writing this for?” the answer will be either the dismissive “Whoever’s capable of reading it” or the more revealing “I don’t mind about that, I’m just trying to set out the truth”.

This ideal of impersonality may be appropriate for the practice of science¹. But even there it is a kind of fiction or idealisation, for obvious sociological reasons. The image of science as simply setting out the truth with impersonal objectivity is a kind of never-quite-realised ideal that has to be sustained against the contingent background of particular personalities and relationships; nothing is *really* written with no audience in mind. Even in science impersonal objectivity is an intellectual construction which presupposes the interpersonal and the subjective; even the purest science is written in some particular language, at some particular time, addressed to some particular scientific community. (There is no stating scientific truths without stating them in some language; and language is essentially communicative. Here too the intersubjective grounds the impersonal.) I think this suggests an *a fortiori* for ethics. If even in science a place for the impersonal is only possible because it is framed by the personal, how much more must this be so in the ethical case.

1 May be. My discussion is itself an abstraction – it abstracts away from over a century of much more careful and subtle debate about these issues than I can offer in this paper. My excuse is only that I am not, here, trying to do the philosophy of science, just to apply results from the philosophy of science to a parallel line of thought about ethics. If the rather crude positions about objectivity that I attack seem like straw men, my reply is not that serious philosophers of science hold them; it is that these positions are worth attacking because they are firmly lodged in our culture’s view of science. It is also that their place in our culture has given them a lot of influence on scientists.

A second, related *a fortiori*: science can look like a totalising system of knowledge which is supposed to capture everything there is to say about whatever may be its subject-matter, definitively. But not even science is *really* that; on its best self-understanding, scientific knowledge is not about conquest and subjugation, but about pilgrimage: in a nice phrase of Popper's, "unending quest". How much more then for ethics.

And a third *a fortiori*: scientific reasoning can look completely context-free, completely lacking in concreteness—like it doesn't matter at all how people (scientists) actually respond to new arguments—like the only thing that matters is the timeless truth of those arguments. In reality this too is false even in science. How much more then in ethics.

In what follows, I make out some of the detail of the case for these three *a fortioris*.

It is commonplace to think of public ethical deliberation as concerned simply with achieving goods. On this, the *welfarist* picture, the object is to identify a good, or more usually a range or list of goods, and work out how to achieve the biggest bundle of these goods.

I do not believe welfarism is simply false, but I do think it is not the whole story about what public (or in fact any) ethical deliberation is about. (So when, as often, welfarism is presented as the whole story about that, it *is* simply false.)

What does welfarism leave out? I suspect it leaves out lots of things. My argument here is not that there is *exactly* one more thing that we must add to our story to get a complete picture of public ethical deliberation. But it is that there is *at least* one more thing. The one left-out thing I talk about here is the persons that goods are goods for.

By this I obviously don't just mean that persons are another good, another form of welfare, to deliberate about. The characteristic thing about persons is that they are not (or not just) *deliberated about*; they are (also) *deliberators*. Alongside the goods there are the persons who choose between the goods: for example, you and me.

This makes a difference because persons are sources of reasons of a kind quite different from the kind(s) of reasons that arise from the goods. For me to take the goods seriously in my deliberations is for me to look for good ways of realising them: certainly of combining them, perhaps of aggregating them. Whereas for me to take persons seriously in my deliberations is for me to *respect them as persons*.

Respect for other persons means that I am obliged to take seriously their standing as deliberators, a standing essentially equal to mine. Like me, they too are in the business of deliberating about the goods, of looking for good ways of realising and perhaps aggregating them. Their attempts to do this are essentially on the same footing as my attempts, and deserve essentially the same consideration.

"Essentially", meaning that other deliberators' standing is equal to mine *inasmuch as they too are deliberators*. They may, of course, be skilled or foolish deliberators, but they are still deliberators. As such, they are apt for second-personal address, apt for treatment as "you"s, not just as "he"s or "she"s. And to fail so to treat them

is to fail to treat them as they deserve to be treated. This is a moral failing which has nothing to do with the goods with which welfarism is concerned, and of which welfarism gives us no direct account. (The best welfarism can do is talk about the *upset* that it causes people when others fail to treat them as people. Like a lot of welfarist or consequentialist explanations, this is implausible *because* it's indirect: cp. the "causal theory of blame".)

A trivial example may help here. Suppose, in a railway carriage on a hot day, I decide to pull the blinds down to exclude the sun and cool the carriage down. This makes things better. Does its making things better settle, all on its own, the question whether I should pull the blinds down? That depends. One thing it depends on is whether I am alone in the carriage. If there are other people there too, my omission to consult them is wrong because it is rude. (Or it can be; context varies, circumstances vary.) "Because it is rude" here means: because it fails to recognise them as other people who have just as much of a right as I have to deliberate about what to do about the blinds. To use a term that Stephen Darwall has popularised, it fails to treat them with appropriate second-personality².

The railway-carriage example may be trivial. The notion that second-personality (in another vocabulary, recognition) is a necessary condition of good public ethical deliberation is not trivial. I hope its key importance is obvious. I suggest that a political philosophy or an ethics which does not take account of second-personality—as welfarism for example does not—cannot possibly be complete, or even adequate.

Here are five good consequences of recognising the importance of second-personality.

First, we get a model of public ethical deliberation which is non-maximising. For the right thing to do is what we can agree on, together, between us. And that may not be the same as (what any of us thinks is) the solution which maximises the goods. Why is this a good consequence? Because it's realistic (and, I am tempted to add, because it annoys the economists).

(Could our model be redescribed so that it comes out as a maximising model, by assigning positive values to recognising deliberators and totting up these positive values? Yes. But so what? With sufficient flexibility about what we'll call a value, *anything* can be redescribed as a maximising solution. This does not imply the ubiquity of (maximising) welfarism; it implies its vacuousness when pushed to this contorting extreme. And its indeterminacy, given that there is no rational way of deciding between the indefinitely many different possible assignments of value that we might use.)

Secondly, we get an intrinsic, not merely an instrumental, explanation of the value of democracy. Democracy isn't only *incidentally* preferable to a system of benevolent dictatorship, because, say, it is as a matter of fact, in this possible world but maybe not in others, a better way of realising welfare. Or

2 S. Darwall, *The Second-Person Standpoint*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA 2006.

again, democracy isn't good just because its absence upsets people (another implausibly indirect explanation: see above). And it isn't good just because it's an efficient way of finding maximising solutions to deliberative problems: as above, it isn't a maximising method *at all*, never mind an efficient one. It's good because our reasons include, not only reasons to seek apt, adroit, and inclusive ways of combining the goods in welfare, but also reasons to respect persons. If you like, we may call these impersonal and second-personal reasons, and say that this account accounts for our second-personal as well as our impersonal reasons.

Thirdly, and connectedly, this model explains a phenomenon very familiar to anyone who thinks about deliberative democracy, and explains it much better than what is most often taken to be the explanation, namely metaethical relativism. The phenomenon I mean is the phenomenon of tolerated disagreement, the phenomenon of thinking that someone else has the right to be wrong – “X's view about this is completely mistaken, but I respect X's right to hold and live by his mistaken view”. The reason why such tolerance is often (though not always) correct is not because there is no fact of the matter about the questions on which we are tolerant. It is because we live together, and, living together, have reason to respect each other's standing as deliberators even when we think others' deliberations have reached a wrong conclusion. (I suspect this explanation not only explains the fact of toleration, but also its limits—for of course there *are* limits to toleration; again, it is hard to explain why there are limits if you are a relativist.)

Fourthly, the model captures the importance of something that Hegel correctly thought was important, namely *concreteness*. Second-personal negotiations, deliberative negotiations with others about what to do together, are necessarily actual negotiations in a way that impersonal deliberations about welfare are not. It matters what others *actually* say, even if what they actually say is manifestly mistaken. Second-personal deliberative processes are characteristically real, not merely ideal, as impersonal ones could be. Undoubtedly there is a peril in this, because of course actual negotiators can be very stupid. But it is a peril that I think we have to live with if we are going to do proper justice to the importance of second-personal reasons. To put it another way, the recognition of the second-personal mandates political engagement in a way that the impersonal alone never could. And that too is a good thing, not a bad thing.

Fifthly, notice the connection between all these points and what Williams has to say about integrity. I think it is plausible to suggest that treating someone as having integrity in Williams' sense means pretty much the same as treating him/her second-personally, as a *you* not just as a *s/he*. The alternative is to treat others, and indeed oneself, as if one were “the impersonal janitor of the utility system”. That is precisely what happens when one cares only about welfarist reasons; such a limitation of concern means that there is nothing in the way of the break-up of the individual as a locus of moral importance, should the factors that make for moral importance happen to move away from the locus of the individual. And this

kind of break-up is precisely what the recognition of second-personal reasons as different in kind from welfare reasons characteristically prevents.

Notice how I've just put things: I've just said that I have a choice between taking an impersonal and a second-personal attitude *to myself*. Does that even make sense? Surely what we might expect me to take to myself is a *first*-personal attitude.

Well, it makes sense the way I'm using the term. But the way I'm using the term is not random; there is a good rationale for calling the right personal attitude to myself a *second*-personal one, though *inter*-personal would work too (and have an equal air of paradox: "inter" means "between", and it takes two things for there to be a between-relation). The key point is that personhood as such demands a certain kind of response from me. With a detectable echo of Kant, we may say that it demands that response whether I meet personhood in my own case, or in the case of someone else. Let me explain.

At the most basic level, to encounter personhood is to encounter something that deserves to be addressed as *you*. As has been stressed by a number of twentieth-century continental philosophers – Sartre, Buber, and above all Levinas – to encounter a *you* changes everything. It changes everything in at least four ways – justification, deliberation, benevolence, interaction. It is to a *you* that I need to justify myself; it is with a *you* that I can debate and deliberate; and the world can, as it happens, bring nice things on me, or nasty things, but strictly speaking only a *you* can *treat* me well or badly. Fourthly, it is only with other persons that I, in the strictest sense of the word, can *interact*.

Where do I encounter personhood? One important place I encounter it is *in my own case*. It is not an accident, nor as they say a sign of madness, that people talk to themselves; nor was Plato wrong to define thought, in the *Theaetetus*, as "the talk which the soul has with itself". The first-personal *is* the second-personal, in the sense that I am a *you* to myself: as Michel de Montaigne puts it, "We have a soul that can be turned upon itself... it can keep itself company" (Montaigne, *Essais*, ed. Donald Frame, p.177). That is why it is possible for me to deliberate with myself, and why it is possible for me to (feel a need to) justify my own actions to myself. Hence it is also because I am a *you* to myself that there is such a thing as *conscience*: that is, it is because encountering myself is encountering personhood that it is possible for me to try and fail to justify what I have done, or propose to do, even to myself.

How do I learn to encounter personhood? The obvious answer is: I learn it from others, and in particular from my mother or whichever other human first treats *me* as a *you*. In this sense the second-personal not only constitutes the first-personal; it also precedes and creates it. To be a person is "always already" to be recognised as a person, by someone else. (Which is not to say there can't be wolf-child cases, though it is to say that such cases are necessarily abnormal.)

This constitutive link between personhood and justification has all sorts of interesting implications. The locus classicus for the teasing-out of these implications is Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et Infini*. The ones to which I want very quickly to draw attention here have to do with divine-command ethics.

The most commonly purveyed account of DCE in contemporary analytical philosophy is pretty well entirely devoid of philosophical interest. According to it, our only reason to act rightly is because God says so, and because God is powerful enough to hurt us if we don't do what he tells us to. This "prudential" version of DCE is contemptible, and is rightly dismissed with contempt by almost everyone who discusses it. But that is hardly interesting. Is there nothing *more* to DCE?

Yes. A second and more interesting version of DCE is the epistemic version, which says that God's commands are to be obeyed because God is infinitely good and infinitely wise; as it is sometimes put, "If in doubt, obey the Maker's instructions". This more promising version gives the theist a convincing if concessive response to the "Euthyphro dilemma", if you believe in such a thing. (I don't, but that's another story: see my "On hearing God speak: Socrates' *daimonion* and Euthyphro's 'dilemma'", *European Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 2010.) But I don't think this second version captures the real force of DCE, which does not need to be concessive in the way the epistemic DCE is. (It is concessive because all it says is that God's commands are an epistemic aid to us in our ignorance: on this picture we cannot face the "Euthyphro dilemma", but there is no necessary connection between God's commands and the essence of morality either.)

The third version of DCE, which *does* capture the real force of this style of argument and is not at all concessive, says roughly this:

1. Justification is always second-personal.
2. There is a duty (at least in principle) of justification of what I do and am to every other person. (Or to put it another way: every other person has a right, at least in principle, to ask me for a justification of what I do and what I am. This duty need not be supposed to be specially exigent, provided it is recognised.)
3. But this duty is stronger relative to any particular person X in proportion to three conditions: (a) how good X is, (b) how wise X is, (c) how intimate to me X is.
4. God is infinitely good, infinitely wise, and more intimate to me than I am to myself. (Augustine, *Conf* 3.6: *eras interior intimo meo et superior summo meo*.)
5. Therefore my duty to justify what I do relative to God, and to do only what is thus justifiable, is infinitely weighty compared with any duty I have relative to any other person.

The point of this version of DCE is that the person above all to whom I have to second-personally justify myself is *God*. Ethics is a matter of divine commands because ethics is a second-personal affair, and relative to every person, God is supereminently second-personal.

This version of DCE has three particularly interesting features. The first is that, if you're a theist, it is a remarkably plausible view. I would go so far as to call it inescapable, once understood. Secondly, it can be attributed to Augustine: see, in particular, the *Confessions*. Thirdly, it suggests the following response to the

“Euthyphro dilemma”. The question set by that dilemma is: Are the commands of the God recognised by this argument to be obeyed because they are good commands, or because they are his commands? If that suggests that there is some kind of logical discomfort in being presented with a command or demand by the mere existence of a divine being confronted as a *you*, notice that you are presented with such a demand by the mere existence of *any* being confronted as a *you*, divine or otherwise. What I said above is, in effect, that *it is second-personality that sets up the requirement for justification*. Perhaps *this* fact – for I take it *is* a fact – is a mysterious one: why should the mere existence of another create this requirement? Is the requirement there because the other person baldly instantiates this requirement, or because the other person (so to speak) *is justified* in instantiating it? Perhaps there is a mystery of what is generally called a Euthyphro dilemma-ish sort here; it might perhaps also be called a fact-value mystery, or a problem about the order of priority in explanation. But there is nothing specific about the *divine* case of second-personal encounter that creates a further mystery of this sort. The main point about the divine case is its supereminence, as Aquinas might call it. The fact (as the theist takes it to be) that God is so very preeminently a person, a *you*, and so preeminently good and wise, is what makes him the source of an especially exigent requirement of justification on us.

The third DCE argument also has a feature that will surely set alarm bells ringing. Namely that “infinitely” in its conclusion. Haven’t I just said that for the theist, his duty to God overrides everything, and overrides it to an infinite extent? Isn’t that pretty clearly a charter for fanaticism?

The answer to the first question is “Yes, of course”. The answer to the second is “It all depends”. “Yes, of course”, because if you actually *believe* what the theist believes if she accepts the third version of DCE, then how could it possibly be otherwise? If God is infinitely good and authoritative etc. in the way that theists suppose, then how could our duty to God possibly be less than infinitely greater than our duty to anything or anyone else?

And “it all depends”, because whether or not the third DCE argument is a charter for fanaticism depends, in fact, on whether fanaticism is what God commands. Is this fanaticism?-- “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and all your strength; and your neighbour as yourself.” I don’t think so. And I do think it’s what God commands.

Which is just as well for political philosophy; because it means that there need be no inconsistency between DCE of this sort and the points I was making before, about tolerating others in civic society. Suppose that taking them seriously as co-deliberators, and hence tolerating their errors, is part – a key part – of loving my neighbour as myself. (And what an interesting turn of phrase that is, incidentally, in the light of our reflections above on how first-personality actually presupposes second-personality.) Then a serious regard and respect of a distinctively second-personal kind for those around us in civic society will be a key part of what God

commands for us. In other words, a liberal civic order will itself be something that can be underwritten by DCE³.

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