PERSONAL ETHICS

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Summary

This article examines different uses of "personal ethics" and argues for and against each of them. In the first part, personal ethics is defined as any ethical system or doctrine that has been chosen as a moral guide in the particular life of an agent. Personal ethics in this sense is defined in terms of individual commitment to a moral life in opposition to amoralism. Moral skepticism, aesthetic amoralism, and minimalism are distinguished as three different sorts of amoralism. Ethics, understood as moral commitment, is discussed and defended. In the second part of the article, personal ethics is presented as a situationist or contextualist doctrine opposing the universal and impartial ethics embraced in the principle of universalization defended by Kant and Hare. Three different contextual approaches, namely the existentialism of Sartre, the Christian situationism of Fletcher, and the feminist ethics of care of Gilligan and Baier, are presented and defended against the principle of universalization. In the third part, a personal ethics is presented as any ethical system that focuses on the role of agents and their moral dispositions or virtues, in opposition to any ethics centered on impersonal values, God, rules, principles, rights, etc. Classical, Christian, and Nietzschean doctrines of virtues are reviewed and argued for and against. Finally, a modern version of virtue ethics articulated by MacIntyre is discussed and criticized.

1. Introduction

Doubts can be cast on whether "personal ethics" has any clear meaning. The term "personal" is used in a number of ways, which makes it impossible to set out one definition. It seems that at least three senses can be distinguished. Firstly, personal ethics is any ethical system or doctrine that has been chosen in some way as a moral guide in the particular life of an agent. Personal ethics in this sense is built upon an

individual commitment to a moral life and contrasts with any ethics, no matter how much it is recognized or justified, that is not the object of such a choice. Personal ethics means, in this case, "committed ethics" or "active ethics." In the second sense, personal ethics is any situationist ethics opposing the universal and impartial ethics embraced in the principle of universalization. Personal is in this case tantamount to "particular" or "contextual." In the third sense, a personal ethics is any ethical system that focuses on the role of agents and their moral dispositions, in opposition to any ethics centered on impersonal values, God, rules, principles, rights, etc. Although in practice all three senses of ethics can intertwine in one and the same doctrine, they are perfectly distinguishable logically and historically. I will briefly describe the three types of personal ethics and proceed to show their advantages and limitations. Let us start with a personal ethics understood as a commitment.

2. Personal Ethics as Moral Commitment

The first question we have to ask is whether personal commitment is a necessary condition of human life. To be committed morally is to subscribe to certain values and attempt to apply them in practice. In the history of ethics this question has been couched in terms of whether or not I should be moral. And if the answer is "yes" the next step would be to address the question "Why should I be moral?"

We could think that posing this question is itself a sign of moral skepticism, because expressing doubts about whether we should follow the moral tradition we were brought up with is itself a proof that this tradition no longer is exercising a dominant force upon us. This was perhaps the standpoint taken by Wittgenstein in his remark from 1937: "The way to solve the problem you see in life is to live in a way that will make what is problematic disappear. The fact that life is problematic shows that the shape of your life does not fit into life's mould. So you must change the way you live and, once your life does fit into the mould, what is problematic will disappear." Whatever Wittgenstein means by the "mould of life," it seems clear that he maintains that certain sorts of questions about what constitutes a good life appear only because the problematic has not disappeared. To make it disappear is to go back to practicalities and start living again. An *ad hoc* argument can be given to support the Wittgensteinian position. Morals consist of not only living a certain life but also of using correct moral language. Those who ask "Why should I be moral?" do not use moral language correctly. The reason for this is simple: "to be moral" means "to do what I should do" and therefore the whole question becomes tautological: "Why should I do what I should do?" This argument would be sufficient to show the circularity of the initial question. Wittgenstein nonetheless purports to strengthen it by presenting some additional comments about the nature of ethics.

In his *A Lecture on Ethics* Wittgenstein maintains that ethical language is based on two uses of key moral terms like "good" and "ought." The first is instrumental and the other absolute. According to the Wittgensteinian point of view, only the latter use can properly be called a moral one. "Supposing that I could play tennis and one of you saw me playing and said 'Well, you play pretty badly' and suppose I answered, 'I know I'm playing badly but I don't want to play any better,' all the other could say would be, 'Ah, then that's all right.' But suppose I had told one of you a preposterous lie and he came

up to me and said 'You're behaving like a beast' and then I were to say 'I know I behave badly, but then I don't want to behave any better,' could he then say 'Ah, then that's all right'? Certainly not; he would say 'Well, you ought to want to behave better.'" Ethics based on the adjective "absolute" has no descriptive meaning, although it has a deep sense, which Wittgenstein exemplifies as an "entirely personal matter" with three sorts of feelings he experienced in his life that can be described as absolute. The first is to "wonder at the existence of the world," the second an experience of being "absolutely safe," and the third one of "feeling guilty." All these expressions look like similes. But the similes must be similes of something. In the case of ethical expressions there are no facts behind them. The very essence of these religious-like ethical expressions is their nonsensicality or, what is the same, their allegorical use. "For all I wanted to do with them was just to go beyond significant language . . . This running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely hopeless." The very moral commitment of an agent is a logical necessity of the proper understanding and use of moral language but because it is embedded in personal experience of the absolute it must be spelled out in the first person singular. Or rather it cannot be spelled out at all, for "if a man could write a book on Ethics which really was a book on Ethics, this book would, with an explosion, destroy all the other books in the world."

Others authors' efforts also led them to comment on the "amoralist" dilemma. They not only gave additional arguments to show that, in the sense in which Wittgenstein understood this problem, it is an apparent problem only, but they tried to answer the question understood as a non-trivial question. According to Hare, in *Moral Thinking. Its Levels, Method and Point,* to make a moral judgment is to use "ought" in the first person prescriptively, universally, and overridingly. Because I will talk about Hare's universalizability principle later, I will confine myself to the other elements of his theory—prescriptivity and overridingness: "The prescriptivity of moral judgments can be explained formally as the property of entailing at least one imperative." "Ought" in a moral sense turns out to be analogous to Kant's imperative will, or illocutionary performative in Austin's sense, or a synonym of "must" in modal logic. To say "I ought to do X but I will not do X" is, on the basis of this theory, a contradictory statement. "Ought" does not describe anything at all. It prescribes something to be done and by the same token changes something in the world. Again, under this interpretation of moral language we can see clearly why the question "Why should I be moral?" is misleading. Does all this mean that the existence of the amoralist is logically impossible? Well, there are some additional uses in which the question "Why should I be moral?" has some sense. First of all, an amoralist may be a person who expresses no prescription, uses no moral language, and has no personal ethics at all. Amoralists are morally indifferent in the sense that they have no universalizable desires. Peter Winch, in *Comment Understanding and Social Inquiry,* mentions an example of a businessman who lives "imprisoned" in his discourse: "Consider, for example, a man who, in the pursuit of business success, does something morally unjustifiable; and who, when we try to remonstrate with him on moral grounds, fails completely to respond to the moral categories involved in our arguments, but continues to think about his actions solely in terms of criteria of business efficiency." Of course we have no logical reasons to argue against such a moral abstainer. Do we have some moral arguments to challenge him with? Suppose we say, following Hare: "If you use 'ought' in a moral sense you prescribe something universally to be done." And suppose the businessman answers "I

know that. But this is why I never use 'ought' in a moral sense." If asked for a reason, he can give one: "I try to be prudential: prudence and morality never go together. This is why I do not need any personal ethics." The traditional way to challenge such a standpoint would be, perhaps, to resort to Plato.

In *The Republic* Socrates narrates the story of the ring of Gyges. Gyges is a shepherd who finds a magical ring that, when turned upside down on his finger, makes him invisible. Following his fortune, he seduces a king's wife, kills the king, and becomes a tyrant. Would our life change if we found such a ring? Would we become immoral? Probably, most people would lead their lives as if nothing had happened for it is hard to turn the moral conscience on and off at our convenience. On the other hand, there would be a few who, like Gyges, would take advantage of the attractive opportunity in order to gain power, fame, and riches. Suppose a businesswoman was delighted to be in Gyges' shoes. Should she hear what Socrates tried to show, counterintuitively, that it is better to be harmed than to harm others and that no tyrant can be really happy, she would probably be discouraged from any desire to become moral. Prichard in his famous article "Does moral philosophy rest on a mistake?" argued against Plato. He maintained that it is not universally the case that morality and prudence coincide. The question "Ought I to do my duty?" would have no answer if "ought" were understood prudentially. Prichard's conclusion was that it is mistaken to ask for prudential justifications for living morally. But this, of course, would furnish an additional argument for amoralists because it is they who do not want to live morally at all. The last resort would be probably to argue that moral virtues "are required as much for success in egoism as in morality." The plausibility of this argument depends on several assumptions about society's norms and expectations and their influence on the success or failure of an agent's action.

Let us check if we can argue any better against another kind of amoralist: not a crude businesswoman but a self-dependent artist. In Oscar Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* Lord Henry preaches to his young friend Dorian Gray: "The mutilation of the savage has its tragic survival in the self-denial that mars our lives. We are punished for our refusals. Every impulse that we strive to strangle broods in the mind, and poisons us. The body sins once, and has done with its sin, for action is a mode of purification. Nothing remains then but the recollection of a pleasure, or the luxury of a regret. The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it." As in the former discussion, the amoralist defended egoism or prudence against the morality. Here Lord Henry defends aesthetic experience *versus* morals. Oscar Wilde personally found this conflict to be profound and heartrending and solved it in one way or another in his own life. Personal ethics as a moral commitment would, on this account, be a matter of choice. But let us notice that those who have chosen in favor of art were not uncommitted individuals. Their amoralism was accompanied by a passionate commitment of a different sort. The difference between moral and aesthetic commitment can be considered conflicting only by recourse to some substantial concept of morality and aesthetics. If we accept Hare's idea that the moral prescriptions are not only universalizable but also overriding, we must conclude that whatever we decide to choose is, by definition, a moral decision.

The third, and last, kind of uncommitted person would be neither an egoist nor an artist but a minimalist. Minimalists cannot be properly called amoral for they are in fact morally committed but in a minimal way. Their moral "uncommitment" can be understood best in opposition to the maximalists. J.O. Urmson in his essay *Saints and Heroes* distinguished between saints and heroes primarily in terms of the self-control of and sacrifice made by saints and the control of fear and level of risk assumed by heroes By saints, Urmson does not mean exclusively people regarded as such by the Church but all good Samaritans.

Most good Samaritans and heroes paradoxically remain unknown. As the contemporary Polish philosopher Jacek Holowka comments in *Problemy etyczne w literaturze pieknej*: "Such an attitude will be truly lofty if, in addition to nobody seeing it, such a man is a non-religious person so that he or she does not expect any heavenly reward or the admiration of gods. Unfortunately, the examples of such deeds, although they must inspire respect in us, need to remain anonymous . . . The soldiers who died alone in wars, doctors who worked for others in times of pestilence, the captains of sinking ships, Indians who defended their tribes to the bitter end, people who were led into the gas chambers in concentration camps, and the brave victims of the inquisition. Their lives were marked by a rare and invisible beauty."

Minimalists in practice need not be minimalists in theory. They may teach others moral heroism and good Samaritanism but when asked why they are not heroes they have a wide repertoire of answers: "The signs do not need to walk in the direction they show," "I would live like a hero if I were a hero but I am not a hero," or "At least I tried." In this case, Jesus of Nazareth, St. Francis, Mother Teresa, Gandhi, and Albert Schweitzer would all in fact possess personal ethics in opposition to those who, for different reason, do not live up to moral ideals, although they pass for decent people anyway.

Some Christians who believe in the overriding power of love, and act utilitarians who admit that we should maximize the happiness of the greatest number, cannot escape the highly unpopular conclusion that it is our duty to become good Samaritans or heroes. It can be argued, however, that although we are praised if we do heroic acts, we cannot be blamed if we fail to live up to such a demanding ideal. Second, even an act-utilitarian could argue that most Samaritans are not good Samaritans. Bad Samaritans do the opposite to Mephistopheles in Goethe's *Faust*: "I am part of the little power which wills evil all the time but all the time does good." Bad Samaritans will good all the time, but, lacking virtues or the knowledge necessary to realize their plans, produce always more evil than good.

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Biographical Sketch

Witold R. Jacorzynski obtained his master degree in 1989 and his PhD degree in 1993 at the Institute of Philosophy, University of Warsaw, Poland. From 1987–1989, he was a visiting scholar and a lecturer at the Autonomous National University of Mexico and the Mexican National Institute of Archaeology and History in Mexico. Other postings have included the Medical Academy of Warsaw (1989–1992), the Centre for Philosophy and Health Care of Swansea University in Wales, United Kingdom (1990–91), the Hastings Center of Bioethics in USA (1991), the University of Veracruz in Mexico (1993), the University of Warsaw (1993–1996), and the University of Notre Dame, Indiana, USA (1996–97). Since 1997 Professor Jacorzynski has worked in CIESAS Sureste (The Centre for Investigation and Postgraduate Studies in Social Anthropology, Southeastern Mexico) in San Cristobal de Las Casas, Mexico where he writes and teaches on particular topics in the field of social anthropology, philosophy and ethics. Professor Jacorzynski's main areas of specialization are Mexican anthropology, ecological anthropology, bioethics, descriptive ethics and moral philosophy. He is the author of a book and multiple articles on moral philosophy and anthropology in Polish, Spanish and English.