

Joseph Raz on the Problem of the Amoralist

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Abstract

Joseph Raz has argued that the problem of the amoralist is misconceived. In this paper, I present three interpretations of what his argument is. None of these interpretations yields an argument that we are in a position to accept.

1 Introduction

The problem of the amoralist is the problem of providing a person who is not moral with a reason to be moral. In his paper ‘The Amoralist’, Joseph Raz concerns himself with this problem, but he does not attempt to solve it. Rather the problem itself is his target (1999: 273–4). Raz implies that what is called the problem of the amoralist is not a genuine philosophical problem. He describes the problem as misconceived, as involving an illusory distinction and as arising from a false assumption. This paper offers three different interpretations of Raz’s argument against the supposed problem being an actual problem. The argument is objectionable on all of these interpretations. Before introducing any of the interpretations, it will be useful to state Raz’s conception of the problem.

An amoralist is a person who is not moral. They are without morality. Someone can be an amoralist while not even understanding what it is to be moral. Someone might also understand but see no reason to be moral, or so it seems at first blush. ‘Why should I be moral?’ this amoralist asks. The problem of the amoralist, as Raz conceives it, would be solved if we can give a good argument for being moral to the amoralist who poses this question.

Raz’s conception of the problem also includes a proposition about what the significance would be of there not being any good argument. Morality would not be rationally defensible – would not be rational, for short:

If one can be an amoralist then the validity of morality is undermined unless one can be amoral only because of ignorance or irrationality. Morality, the underlying thought is, is rationally defensible only if it can marshal arguments in its support which an amoralist must rationally accept. (1999: 273)

This quotation gives some inkling of what it is for morality to be rational. Raz adopts a provisional criterion for when a person has morality that enables a clarification of this matter. On this criterion, to be moral is to believe that each person is valuable in themselves, simply in virtue of being a person. For morality to be rational is for there to be a good argument for the truth of this belief (1999: 276). We will consider a proposal for the requirements that an argument must meet in order to be good later in this paper.

Raz’s provisional criterion is questionable. Can one be a moral person just by having a belief? Does not having this quality also involve being disposed to act in certain ways? Towards

the end of ‘The Amoralist’, Raz himself subjects his provisional criterion to scrutiny and finds it wanting (1999: 299-301). It was introduced so that he could proceed with evaluating the problem of the amoralist with a greater degree of precision than if nothing had been said about what it is to have morality. Raz reassures us that what he has to say can be adapted for other understandings (1999: 274).

2 An Interpretation of Raz’s Argument

In this section, I will present an interpretation of Raz’s argument based on some of the statements he makes regarding how to interpret it. One of these statements also concerns another argument: an argument for why the rationality of morality depends on being able to provide an amoralist with a reason for being moral. After introducing this other argument, Raz tells us that he will attack a fundamental presupposition of it:

True, this argument is too simple. It disguises many ambiguities, and it begs many questions. I will not, however, try to challenge it directly. Rather I will undermine its most fundamental presupposition. It sees morality as a separate domain. The amoralist stands outside it and refuses to go in. (1999: 276)

Raz thinks of the presupposition that he identifies as fundamental because it is impossible for there to be an amoralist unless the presupposition is true and the problem of the amoralist depends on this possibility in order to be a problem at all. He will therefore attack the problem by attacking the presupposition.

We can reconstruct Raz’s argument as three premises and two inferences from these premises:

- (1) The problem of the amoralist is only a genuine philosophical problem if it is possible for there to be an amoralist.
- (2) A necessary condition for the possibility of an amoralist is that morality is a separate domain.
- (3) Morality is not a separate domain.

From (2) and (3):

- (4) It is impossible for there to be an amoralist.

From (1) and (4):

- (5) The problem of the amoralist is not a genuine philosophical problem.

I have formulated this argument without clarifying what it means for morality to be a separate domain. I have also not explained Raz’s grounds for denying that morality is a separate domain. These two tasks will occupy the rest of this section.

Raz describes the amoralist as standing outside of morality. This is a metaphorical description because morality is not a region of space or a physical entity that occupies a region of space, outside of which the amoralist stands. Raz’s articulation of the presupposition that he attacks is also metaphorical: morality is a separate domain. If one thinks of the amoralist as standing outside of morality, then it seems that an attack on this presupposition will remove the possibility of an amoralist. But this will only be the case if the presupposition, when understood in less metaphorical terms, still captures a necessary condition for the possibility of an amoralist. I do not think that Raz’s understanding of it fulfils this requirement. This objection will be made in the next section. At this point, I will present his understanding.

For morality to be a separate domain, on Raz’s understanding, is for there to be moral interests and for there to be other practical interests, all of which are not only something other than moral interests but can also be pursued without being moral. Raz does not spell out that

this is his understanding, but it is suggested by the fact that much of his essay is spent arguing that there is a practical interest which, though not itself a moral interest, cannot be pursued without having morality. The closest Raz comes to spelling out his understanding is in the following passage, in which he compares his provisional criterion for having morality with an alternative criterion, according to which to have morality is to engage in a distinctively moral form of reasoning:

What is common to the view that the mark of morality is acceptance of the principle that people are of value in themselves and to the suggestion that it is marked by the deployment of a special method of argument is a conception of morality as an autonomous area, distinct from other practical concerns. This assumption, seen in operation in Nagel's argument, and essential to all contractarian approaches to morality, though not only to them, explains how the amoralist is possible: he is someone standing outside morality and denying that there is a route, a rationally compelling route, which could lead him in. (1999: 302)

The word 'practical' is being used here in a very broad sense, in which it contrasts with theoretical and aesthetic. When Raz criticizes others for assuming that morality is distinct from other practical concerns, he means something more than that these others are assuming that there are practical interests that are not moral interests. He means that they are assuming that all of these practical interests also do not require having morality in order to be pursued.

Having considered Raz's understanding of what it is for morality to be a separate domain, let us turn now to what Raz has to say against it having this quality, in other words his justification for (3). Raz focuses on the interest of friendship. We can divide what Raz has to say about friendship into two parts. First, there is his reason for thinking that friendship is not a moral interest. Second, there is his reason for thinking that friendship nevertheless requires morality in order to be pursued. Regarding the first part, Raz is very brief. He tells us:

Volunteering to work for Oxfam in one's spare time may be good for one because it is a morally good thing to do. But there is nothing specifically morally good about having friends. People bereft of friends may have a lonely and impoverished life, but they are not morally at fault. (1999: 295)

Raz talks about having friends in this quotation, but when he considers why friendship requires morality, he focuses on being a friend (1999: 285). I believe his thinking is best formulated throughout in terms of being friends. Adapting what is said in the quotation, his view might be that there is nothing morally good about being a friend, so being a friend is not a moral interest. Alternatively, it might be that a person who decides not to be friends with anyone cannot be morally faulted purely because of this decision, so being a friend is not a moral interest. Raz's reason for saying that being a friend is not a moral interest is less than fully clear. I will not dwell on this issue, however, as it does not matter greatly within this paper.

Raz has much more to say on why being a friend, even if it does not count as a moral interest itself, nevertheless requires some sort of morality. Raz claims that to be a friend to another one must have concern for the well-being of the other, independently of what one can gain from their well-being, and that to have this is to treat the other as having value in themselves (1999: 287). Raz seems to associate this treatment with believing that the other has value in themselves, such that there cannot be this way of treating the other without the belief. He considers various objections from hypothetical amoralists to the claim that being a friend therefore involves having morality. I will present two of these objections. Firstly, could not someone be friends with another yet value them purely as a person who brings certain good

things into their life, without regarding the other as having value in themselves? Raz denies that this is possible:

The more extreme amoralist... may say that he cares about his friend, treats him as a person of value, only when doing so serves his own interests in the friendship.

This amoralist simply is not a friend to this other person. (1999: 288)

Another objection that Raz considers, from a more moderate amoralist, is that one can believe that one's friends have value in themselves without believing that each person has value in themselves. One can believe that one's friends have some quality which not everyone has – that they are all artists, for instance – and that it is this quality which gives them value in themselves. By Raz's provisional criterion for having morality, one can therefore be a friend without being moral. To counter this objection, Raz turns against his provisional criterion and subjects it to criticism. He says that we do not have sufficient grounds for judging that the supposed amoralist who values their friends in themselves because of some less-than-universal quality is actually outside of morality:

The failure to identify a position which marks the moralist off from the (re-formed) amoralist was a failure to find a way of reading 'people have value in themselves' which renders it both true and appropriate to be the mark of morality. (1999: 301)

I will pass over the readings that Raz considers of the claim that people have value in themselves, because there is an obvious objection to his argument, as interpreted in this section.

3 An Objection to the Argument

The argument ascribed to Raz in the previous section requires that we understand what it is for morality to be a separate domain in such a way that its being a separate domain is a necessary condition for the possibility of an amoralist. Otherwise (2) will be false. But Raz's understanding does not appear to fulfil this requirement. On that understanding, for morality to be a separate domain is for there to be moral interests and for there to be other practical interests, all of which are not only something other than moral interests but can also be pursued without being moral. However, if that is our understanding, then just one instance of a practical interest which is not a moral interest, yet cannot be pursued without having morality, would mean that morality is not a separate domain. However, in the case of a single exception, it seems that there could be an amoralist still. They would not be able to pursue that practical interest, but they would be able to pursue other practical interests. Even if there are many practical interests that presuppose morality, so long as a person does not need to pursue a morality-presupposing interest in order to live at all, there can be an amoralist.

Part of the difficulty with evaluating Raz's understanding of what it is for morality to be a separate domain is that the concept of a practical interest, or 'practical concern', to use his term, has not been sufficiently clarified. Raz does not clarify it in his paper. I am not sure how to clarify it myself, beyond giving examples of practical interests, such as maintaining one's health and having a fulfilling working life. What we can say is that there needs to be a response to the concern articulated in the previous paragraph, or else we cannot accept premise (2) of the argument. In fact, in the absence of a response, we ought to reject it, because the concern looks as if it will survive any plausible clarification of what a practical interest is.

4 A Second Interpretation and an Objection

There are ways of interpreting Raz's argument which render it immune to the objection in the previous section. A second interpretation begins with the observation that Raz, at certain

points in his paper, does not sound as if he is denying that there can be amoralists at all. Rather he sounds as if he is denying that there can be amoralists who are relevant to the problem of the amoralist. To be relevant to the problem of the amoralist, as Raz conceives it, a possible amoralist must have qualities which enable them to challenge the rationality of morality. Raz denies that all possible amoralists have these qualities:

With Williams we can leave on one side the amoralist who has no concern for people, no friendships, no people he likes or is fond of, and who has no desire for such feelings, attitudes, and relationships. . . [His] life is so severely limited that—for reasons similar to those explained above concerning the person who denies any values—he poses no challenge to morality. The challenge is posed by an amoralist who can have a rich and rewarding life, while denying the value of people. Such an amoralist is like us in valuing friendship and companionship. (1999: 283)

On Raz's conception of the problem of the amoralist, it includes the proposition that if there is no satisfactory answer we can give to the amoralist who asks, 'Why should I be moral?' then morality is not rational. But in light of this proposition, the problem entails that there can be an amoralist whose life is not severely limited, or so Raz maintains. For only this kind of amoralist, he thinks, can challenge the rationality of morality.

In the quotation above, Raz suggests that if amorality cannot be combined with being a friend, then the amoralist's life is too severely limited to challenge the rationality of morality. For this view to have any plausibility, then being a friend has to cover other close relationship roles. In line with this point, Raz says that he is counting other close personal relationships as friendships (1999: fn. 22). With this expanded usage in place, we arrive at a second interpretation of his argument:

- (1) The problem of the amoralist is only a genuine philosophical problem if it is possible for there to be an amoralist who challenges the rationality of morality.
- (2) A necessary condition for the possibility of such an amoralist is that there can be an amoral life which is not severely limited.
- (3) An amoral life must be severely limited.

From (2) and (3):

- (4) It is impossible for there to be an amoralist who challenges the rationality of morality.

From (1) and (4):

- (5) The problem of the amoralist is not a genuine philosophical problem.

The third premise of this argument is supported by the following sub-argument: if being an amoralist cannot be combined with being a friend, then an amoral life must be severely limited; being an amoralist cannot be combined with being a friend; therefore an amoral life must be severely limited. In the rest of this section, I shall object to the significance attached to being friends, on this interpretation of the argument.

There is a conception of what it is for morality to be rational according to which the fact that amorality cannot be combined with being a friend is irrelevant. On Raz's provisional criterion, having morality is a matter of having a certain belief: the belief that each person is of value in themselves, in virtue of being a person. One might think then that, since the belief that defines morality is not self-evident, for morality to be rational is for there to be a good argument for this belief. A good argument, one might further think, is an argument for the truth of this belief which is sound, which does not require having the belief in order to be understood and which cannot be reasonably objected to, whatever one's stance towards the belief is. If that is the case, then the rationality of morality depends on being able to provide

a good argument to the amoralist who asks, ‘Why should I be moral?’ But if we accept this line of thought, then the fact that being an amoralist cannot be combined with being a friend, supposing it is a fact, is irrelevant for setting aside the problem of the amoralist. We can still proceed along the same line of thought for answering the question.

It is precisely this line of thought which Raz considers as grounding the philosophical need to answer the amoralist:

If one can be an amoralist then the validity of morality is undermined unless one can be amoral only through ignorance or irrationality. Why should one think so? The simple argument runs somewhat as follows. If morality is valid, that is, if people are valuable in themselves, then it is possible for people to come to know that. Moreover, it is possible for people who are amoral to realize that there are rationally compelling reasons to accept that people are valuable in themselves. (1999: 276)

If this is why the amoralist poses a challenge to the rationality of morality, it is altogether unclear why there would no longer be this challenge should being a friend presuppose morality. Raz questions the line of thought just quoted by questioning whether having morality consists in having the belief that people are valuable in themselves. But his questioning does not help overcome the objection that it is irrelevant whether or not the amoralist can have friends. He implies that to be moral is to believe, not that each person is of value in themselves, rather that each person potentially has this value (1999: 300). We can adapt the conception of morality being rational presented in the previous paragraph to cope with this position. For morality to be rational is for there to be a good argument, addressed to the amoralist as well, for the truth of this belief. The challenge to provide an argument thus remains whether or not the amoralist can have friends.

5 A Third Interpretation and Objections

Raz thinks that if an amoral life must be severely limited, then the amoralist cannot challenge the rationality of morality. The third interpretation of Raz’s argument attributes the same main argument to him as the previous interpretation, but differs from it over the sub-argument for the third premise: that an amoral life must be severely limited. It does not say that the incompatibility between amorality and being a friend is enough, on its own, to entail that an amoral life is limited to this extent. Raz, however, suggests that the points he makes about friendship can be adapted for other things (1999: 283-284). There are many other potential aspects of one’s life which can only be accessed by having morality. They too presuppose morality. It is in light of this fact, according to the argument on the third interpretation, that the only possible amoralist is one whose life is too severely limited to challenge the rationality of morality. Hence the problem of the amoralist is not a genuine problem.

Raz indicates that his argument is not to be understood as appealing exclusively to the amoralist’s lack of the opportunity to be friends in the following passage:

By examining the amoralist who has at his disposal the full range of goods by which his life can be enriched, and investigating the evaluative presuppositions of these goods we can—I will argue—demonstrate that there is no gulf between the moralist and the amoralist, and we can do so more securely and in a more far-reaching way than if we disregard these value-presuppositions in trying to extend the amoralist’s sympathies and motivations. (1999: 284)

Raz's thought here is that if we try to conceive of an amoralist who has the opportunity to choose various potentially rewarding options in their life, while remaining amoral, our conception is incoherent because all or virtually all of these options presuppose having morality. The only possible amoralist is one whose life is too severely limited to challenge the rationality of morality, while the closest thing to an amoralist whose life is not that severely limited is a person within the horizon of morality. Raz puts his conclusion, somewhat obscurely, in terms of there being no gulf between the moralist and the amoralist. What he means is that only an amoralist whose life is not that severely limited is relevant to the problem of the amoralist, but a person with such a life is actually within morality.

Since Raz writes primarily about the relationship between having morality and being friends, in order for the argument on the third interpretation to work, we need to be able to apply his points about friendship to other potential aspects of a person's life. The result of this application needs to be that the only possible amoralist is one whose life is too severely limited to be relevant to the problem of the amoralist. I do not think that we can apply Raz's points about friendship to yield this result. When arguing that being a friend presupposes morality, because it requires concern for the well-being of one's friend independent of one's own gain, Raz sets aside something that might appear to be friendship but is actually something else. The person whose behaviour is superficially friend-like is nevertheless not a friend if they do not have unselfish concern for the well-being of the other. The setting aside of this person as not a true friend was noted earlier in this paper. It fits with how people talk. For instance, someone in a difficult situation may find that certain people, whom they previously regarded as friends, suddenly keep their distance, despite not being in any great danger. They might react by saying, 'These people were not really my friends.' Raz implies that to be a friend to the person would be to show concern for that person's well-being, in a way that is not calculated for one's own gain, and this implication seems to capture the thinking behind the reaction. Somewhat confusingly, he refers to the relationship which these people had with the person in difficulty as limited friendship (1999: 288). A more appropriate term, granting Raz's outlook, is pseudo-friendship. They are pseudo-friends with the person. (The question of whether this person was only pseudo-friends in return need not detain us.) Now being a pseudo-friend does not presuppose morality and so can be pursued by the amoralist. So although the amoralist misses out on being a friend, there is something that resembles it which is available to them. This leads to a worry about Raz's effort to establish that the amoralist's life is severely limited.

Raz's main example of something that presupposes morality is being a friend, but he thinks we can apply his point about this to other things. However, since with this example, there is something that resembles the morality-presupposing good which is available to the amoralist, we are left with the thought that the same will be true of other things that presuppose morality. For each potential aspect of a person's life that presupposes morality, or many of them, there will be something that resembles it which does not carry this presupposition and which is therefore available to the amoralist. For example, if philosophy presupposes morality, the amoralist cannot be a philosopher but they can be something resembling it, namely a sophist (Nussbaum 1985: 129-131; Nussbaum 1999: II). And so, while it may be that the amoralist's life strikes us as worse because of what cannot be accessed, we will not be able to dismiss this figure as having a life that is too severely limited to be of relevance to the problem of the amoralist, owing to such options being available to them. This is the worry.

Raz does not clarify the notion of a severely limited life. But at least one kind of amoral life that he describes obviously deserves to be thought of as severely limited:

The amoralist does not believe in morality, either because he doubts its validity, or because he is not aware of it, or does not comprehend it. This does not mean, of course, that he does not believe in any values, in anything being valuable. That would reduce the amoralist to the level of an animal able to pursue its bodily imperatives only, a creature driven by hunger for food or sex, by the need to discharge bodily functions, and to protect itself from extremes of heat or cold. Such creatures pose no challenge to moral philosophy. (1999: 274)

According to Raz, the role that value beliefs play in action entails that one must believe that some things are valuable in order to lead a life that goes beyond the pursuit of bodily imperatives. An amoralist who does not believe this, and therefore only has these imperatives to guide them, obviously leads a severely limited life. Raz thinks that any person outside morality also leads a life that is too severely limited for them to challenge the rationality of morality, even if they do have some value beliefs. But the amoralist conceived above does not have a life that is so obviously severely limited. I think it is as close to the life which Raz describes as rich and rewarding as it is to the severely limited life he presents in this quotation. Furthermore, merely asserting that most other goods are like friendship in what they presuppose should not convince us that an amoral life is without its distinctive rewards. We cannot simply assume, as Raz invites us to, that there are no valuable life options that in turn presuppose amorality.

So far I have cast doubt on Raz's argument that the amoralist's life is too severely limited to challenge the rationality of morality by casting doubt on his claim that an amoral life must be severely limited. Raz does not do enough to secure this claim. In any case, one can grant the claim yet still object to Raz's argument on the third interpretation. The objection that was made in the previous section can be adapted for it. I imagine an amoralist articulating the objection like so: "To be moral is to believe that each person is valuable in themselves, in virtue of being a person. For morality to be rational, in the sense in which I am interested, there needs to be an argument that establishes the truth of this belief and this argument must be addressed not just to people with the belief but also to someone like me. Perhaps not holding this belief means that my life is severely limited. But that does not entitle you to dismiss the challenge I have set: either provide a good argument to me for the belief that defines morality or concede that morality is not rationally defensible. The only way to dismiss the challenge is to show that my criterion for morality being rational is mistaken and there is no reason to think that you can show this just by arguing that my life must be severely limited." Raz does not respond to the amoralist who thinks in this way, despite initially motivating the problem of the amoralist by appealing to their criterion of rationality. Without a response, his argument on the third interpretation also does not work.

6 Solving Versus Dissolving the Problem

It is tempting to ignore Raz's criticism of the problem of the amoralist and simply treat the material in his paper as an effort to solve the problem. The only other evaluation of his paper that I have encountered adopts this approach (Pedersen 2006: 59-60). According to it, Raz tries to provide the amoralist with a reason to be moral by saying that it is in their interests, so that they can enrich their lives with goods that presuppose morality. But, whatever the merits of this way of treating the material in his paper, Raz himself is opposed to it. Apart from insisting that the problem of the amoralist is his target, he also objects to this way of solving the problem.

The objection is made while operating with his provisional criterion for having morality. But Raz gives no sign of losing his investment in the objection when he subjects that criterion

to criticism, and it can be varied to fit with his final position. The objection is that establishing that it is in the interests of the amoralist to be moral may not establish that the belief which defines morality is true, when this is what needs to be shown:

Some may try to show that since amoralists have to give up many goods which it is in their own interest to pursue, they can be true to their beliefs only at the cost of harming their self-interest. Perhaps it can even be shown that because of this anyone has a self-interested reason to believe in the value of people, though this step falls foul of my objection to Nagel. It does not prove the amoralist wrong. (1999: 282)

When the problem of the amoralist is clarified using Raz's provisional criterion, there is a kind of amoralist who regards the belief that defines morality as false. To provide that amoralist with a reason to be moral, one must argue that the belief is true, not or not merely that the amoralist's life will be worse off in the absence of the belief, otherwise one has failed to engage with their position (1999: 278).

Given what Raz says about appeals to self-interest, his effort to establish that the genuine amoralist must have a severely limited life, that anyone with a rich and rewarding life is actually within morality, is puzzling. For what difference does establishing this make? The principal value of establishing this point appears to be that it gives the amoralist a self-interested reason to be moral. It may be proposed that if the limitations of a life without morality are extreme enough, one cannot be an amoralist without having a severe mental disorder; then there would be no obligation to ensure that an argument for being moral is accessible to the amoralist. Raz does not explicitly say that this is his strategy against the problem of the amoralist, and what he does say is not sufficient for him to adopt this strategy. Certainly, there is a case to be made that an amoralist who can only pursue bodily imperatives is subject to a severe mental disorder. But we do not have reason to think that an amoral life must be limited to this extent nor do we have reason think that other amoralists are all subject to some kind of mental disorder, some kind which means that there is no need to justify morality to them.

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