

Moral philosophy and problems of anxiety

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Abstract. Some of the most influential moral philosophers in the English-speaking world say or suggest that we should only pay attention to moral judgments made in certain states of mind, where these states exclude anxious states. In this paper, I argue that this position faces at least two major problems.

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People make moral and other judgments in various states of mind, but should we pay attention to judgments made in all states when doing moral philosophy? Founding fathers in the English-speaking philosophical world say or imply, “No.” Here is John Rawls:

...we may discard those judgments made with hesitation, or in which we have little confidence. Similarly, those given when we are upset or frightened, or when we stand to gain in one way or the other can be left aside. All these judgments are likely to be erroneous or to be influenced by an excessive attention to our own interests. (1999: 42)

Anxious states of mind are excluded as well. But this is going to cause a problem for some individuals. They have a system of moral philosophy, as many individuals do, but should they encounter phenomena that challenge this system they become anxious. Let us suppose, for the sake of simplicity, that they can stay calm when they only make one judgment about a specific topic that strikes them as not fitting with their system but not when they make two. They experience a crisis of faith or something like it.

There are two problems I wish to draw attention to concerning the proposition that moral judgments made in anxious states of mind are to be ignored. **1. Increasing the ignorable.** One problem is that it will allow for a dodgy response to judgments which do not fit with one's system. If a person's nature is such that any anomalous judgments beyond a certain number make them anxious, then once that number has been reached, their temperament combined with the exclusion of judgments made in anxious states limits the number of anomalous judgments they have to take into account. "Did you make J1 in an anxious state of mind?" "No." "What about J2?" "Yes." "Well, then it does not count. So your moral system only has one anomalous judgment to deal with."

2. No decent alternative. Here is a commonsensical proposal. "If you make an anomalous moral judgment in an anxious state of mind, don't ignore it. Try to get yourself in a calm state in which to contemplate it more carefully." But what if you cannot? "Then ask someone whom you trust." But what if there is no one you trust? At some point down the line of the questions, it seems a decent person is going to have to contemplate doing moral philosophy under conditions of anxiety. I have the impression that other traditions of moral philosophy have more to say about this problem; but I suppose one carefully lives within the limits of a tribe. Our founding fathers tell us not to do moral philosophy in an anxious state – tranquility of mind is what is required (Sidgwick 1876: 545) – but we can envisage a situation in which there is no option but to do so. That is the other problem.

References

- Rawls, J. 1999 (revised edition). *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press.
- Sidgwick, H. 1876. Review of *Ethical Studies* by F.H. Bradley. *Mind* 1: 545-549.