

Morality and Its Phenomenology

When we talk about morality, what are we talking about? The distinction between the moral and non-moral is sometimes introduced by means of example: ‘we all agree’ that ‘murder is wrong’ is a moral judgement, whereas ‘the weather is sunny’ is not. But are such responses sufficient to mark out the topic we are trying to discuss? Is the method too reliant upon the intuitions of a particular subset of people – for example, those who read works on moral philosophy? Dancy (2004a, p3) remarks of ‘the distinction between the moral and the non-moral’ that he thinks ‘that there is no known theoretical way of characterizing it...’¹.

I shall assume here that moral thought has as its object some distinctive, if ill-defined, subject matter. I am aware that this excludes views that take moral claims to be defined by more formal characteristics, for example their role in our motivational structures. My view is that the ‘subject matter’ approach is closer to common usage. I will also hold in mind some problems that this approach brings with it. But as well as having such subject matter, I suggest that when we are actively involved in moral decision making there is a distinct moral phenomenology, an experience “of direct moral obligation”². This experience of obligation is distinct from any merely motivational feeling and does not, I think, receive the attention that it deserves.

In considering the subject matter of morality I shall work with a rough characterisation of moral beliefs given by Copp (2006)³: moral beliefs as those ‘about how to live [one’s] life when [one] takes into account in a sympathetic way the impact of [one’s] life and decisions on others’ (Copp, 2006, p4) (although it is ‘vague’ and ‘it prejudices certain questions’ (Copp, 2006, p4)).

Prejudgement is a serious problem. There is a risk that we implicitly favour our own conception of the nature of morality and exclude other views by fiat. In the characterisation above, a major danger lies in the notion ‘sympathetic’. Are we already tilting the discussion towards emotional rather than rational accounts of morality? Does it also exclude beliefs that may lead to some others being in any way disadvantaged? In my discussion I will try to interpret the term ‘sympathetic’ broadly, along the lines of ‘concern’ or ‘positively interested in’, or ‘care’.

I turn now to moral phenomenology. Horgan and Timmons (2008) give a description (based on Mandelbaum⁴) of “[e]xperiences of direct moral obligation” as having

“... three main features:

1. They are *ought-judgment involving*: an agent having or under-going such an experience judges of herself that in the present circumstances she ought or ought not perform some action.
2. This ought-judgment is part of an overall moral experience in which one experiences a *felt demand* whose elements include (a) a feeling of pressure, (b) a sense of a vector-like force which has an “external” origin and is directed at oneself, and (c) an associated motivational pull toward either performing an action or refraining from performing an action.

¹ Dancy, J. (2004a). *Ethics Without Principles*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

² Horgan and Timmons (‘What does Moral Phenomenology tell us about Moral Objectivity?’, in *Social Philosophy & Policy Foundation, USA, 2008*), p288)

³ Copp, D. (2006). ‘Introduction’. In D. Copp (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁴ Maurice Mandelbaum ‘*The Phenomenology of Moral Experience* (Glencoe, IL: The New Press, 1955)

3. This felt demand is experienced as based on an “*apprehension*” of *unfittingness*—that is, of a contemplated action or omission’s being unfittingly related to present circumstances (as one takes them to be).” Horgan and Timmons (2008, p288)

To the description of moral phenomenology above I would add an additional feature:

- The ought-judgement is taken as categorical. It is not dependent upon other goals, nor does it seem to us to be contingent upon our personal history or current circumstances.

I also suggest that this moral phenomenology typically comes into play when considering our treatment of others. The phenomenology is usually of an ‘other-related’ demand of ‘external’ origin. It is an ‘impartial’ demand in the sense that the other(s)’ interest is a reason for the agent of whom the action is demanded simply in virtue of being the other’s interest. I would not wish to suggest that experiencing such phenomenology is universal, but it is familiar to me and I believe it to be common.

Before considering the phenomenology further, are we under any rational obligation to take the interests of others into account? Korsgaard (1996)⁵ presents a possible answer to this question. She suggests that other people’s reasons matter to us because we are unable to live as ‘practical solipsists’; we can no more deny that other people’s reasons are reasons for us as we can deny that they are speaking a language when they speak to us. Writing about some arguments of Nagel (in his *The Possibility of Altruism*), she says:

“Suppose that we are strangers and that you are tormenting me, and suppose that I call upon you to stop. I say: ‘How would you like it if someone did that to you?’ And now you cannot proceed as you did before. Oh, you can proceed all right, but not just as you did before. For I have obligated you to stop.” (Korsgaard (1996), p142)

How does this obligation arise?

“I invite you to consider how you would like it if someone did that to you. You realize that you would not merely dislike it, you would resent it. You would think that the other has a reason to stop, more, that he has an obligation to stop. And that obligation would spring from your own objection to what he does to you.” (Korsgaard (1996), p142)

“*By making you think these thoughts*, I force you to acknowledge the value of my humanity, and I obligate you to act in a way that respects it.” (Korsgaard (1996), p142, italics in original)

The appeal to consistency is not what “bridges the gap between your reasons and mine, for there is no gap to bridge.” (Korsgaard (1996), p142)

“[A]s Nagel observes, the argument would not go through if you failed to see yourself, to identify yourself, as just someone, a person, one person among others who are equally real. (Korsgaard (1996), p142)

But Korsgaard claims that

“... the argument never really fails in that way. For it to fail in that way, I would have to hear your words as mere noise, not as intelligible speech. And it is impossible to hear the words of a language you know as mere noise. In hearing your words as words, I acknowledge that you are

⁵ Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996

someone. In acknowledging that I can hear them, I acknowledge that I am someone. If I listen to the argument at all, I have already admitted that each of us is someone.” (Korsgaard (1996), p142-3)

Although the notion of ‘changing places’ could be interpreted as a universalising manoeuvre, Korsgaard appears to recognise that impartiality is not solely a requirement of rationality:

“Nagel characterized the egoist as a *practical* solipsist and of course he was right. And no form of solipsism is an option for us. *You can no more take the reasons of another to be mere pressure than you can take the language of another to be mere noise.*” ([emphasis mine] Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, 1996, p143)

The notion of *practical* solipsism and its not being an option for us suggests that this is a theoretical position that is possible [in logic], but not one that human beings can adopt in their practical lives – we are, in some way, practically compelled to impartiality through our participation in social life.

If it works, this seems a very attractive argument. But, taken as an empirical claim, this just seems wrong. People seem perfectly capable of ignoring others’ interests whilst pursuing their own. It may be difficult to ignore all other people’s interests completely – there are usually, but by no means always, others who are close to us, to whom we are emotionally attached and whose welfare matters to us – but that isn’t really the claim here. What is being suggested is that simply in virtue of being part of a linguistic community we cannot help recognise both ourselves and others as just a ‘someone’, and there is no gap between other people’s reasons and our own.

Although Korsgaard claims that her argument does not rely on consistency, it depends on the idea that we cannot be ‘practical solipsists’ and have to take account of others’ reasons. But merely recognising another as a ‘someone’ as we are does not seem to carry the weight that is placed upon it.

I now turn to a philosopher who sets out clearly why he thinks that impartiality is not a purely rational requirement. Norman (1998, p87) spells out his understanding of impartiality: “... the requirement that one’s reasons must give equal weight to everyone else’s desires and interests, along with one’s own.”⁶

Impartiality is at the core of many conceptions of morality. It is present in those that have a ‘universalizability’ criterion for assessing actions. It also appears in, for example, utilitarian systems where each (including ourselves) counts for one and only one.

Let us consider Norman’s (1998) discussion. He asks us to “... imagine someone whose maxim is not to help others in distress”. Kant claims that we “cannot universalize this maxim, because if [we] were in distress [we] would want others to help [us]” (Norman (1998, p86)). However, Norman suggests that this maxim *can* be universalized. It is quite consistent to say

“I see no reason why I should help others in distress. I accept that this logically commits me to the view that if I were in distress, there is no good reason why others should help me. Now certainly I would want them to help. If I were in a position to do so, I would try to induce them to help me. But at the same time I entirely accept that they would be rationally justified in refusing to help me.” (Norman(1998, p86))

⁶ Richard Norman, *The Moral Philosophers: An Introduction to Ethics*, 2e, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998

He suggests that “it is as far as the combination of universalizability and inclinations can take us”. It seems perfectly consistent with treating others as members of a rational community. He goes on to distinguish three senses of universalisability:

“if we are to be rational, our practical maxims must be universalizable in two senses. These are:

- (i) universalizability as consistency – the requirement that one’s reason for performing a certain action in certain circumstances must be a reason for one to perform the same action again in relevantly similar circumstances;
- (ii) universalizability as impersonality – the requirement that one’s reason for performing a certain action in certain circumstances must be a reason for anyone to perform the same action in relevantly similar circumstances.”

But “[i]t does not follow ... that one’s practical maxims must be universalizable in a third sense” that of impartiality, as described above. This is “quite distinct”, and “cannot legitimately be presented simply as a requirement of formal rationality” (Norman (1998, p87)).

Returning to Korsgaard’s discussion, we can see elements of Norman’s *impersonality* – the requirement in this case would be that one’s reason for objecting to being tormented in certain circumstances must be a reason for *anyone* to object to being tormented in relevantly similar circumstances. But in Korsgaard’s example not only does the victim dislike suffering and object to it; the victim also believes that the perpetrator has an *obligation* not to inflict suffering. Is having an obligation a reason that ‘impartiality’ would require to be a reason for anyone? Only if there is a pre-existing background of moral obligations.

Korsgaard’s argument for impartiality continues by claiming that simply in hearing the victim’s words as words, the perpetrator acknowledges that the victim is *someone*. If the perpetrator acknowledges that they hear them, then they acknowledge that they themselves, too, are someone. So, by listening to the argument, the perpetrator has already admitted that each party is someone, and hence sees what they have in common. They are both a ‘someone’.

The full argument is therefore not just an appeal to consistency that makes the perpetrator take the victim’s reasons into account or bridges the gap between their reasons and the victim’s. It claims that there is no gap to bridge because the reason in all cases is the value of each person’s humanity.

Is this an answer to Norman’s (1998, p87) claim that impartiality cannot be ‘simply ... a requirement of formal rationality’?

Not really. Nothing in Norman’s treatment of impartiality suggests that we do not recognise others as human. It claims that we can rationally be prepared to take the consequences of an uncomfortable universalised maxim.

Our expectation of resentment, or actual experience of resentment, relies upon an underlying belief that such actions *ought* not to be done, both by others as well as by ourselves, and this belief is not rationally necessary. We cannot use Korsgaard’s argument to show that we all have that obligation; it makes the assumption that we do. It reveals that (expectation of) resentment and believing that there is an obligation go hand in hand. Norman’s point stands.

Although Korsgaard’s discussion of ‘resentment’ may not provide us with a conclusive argument for our participation in moral practices, it does point us towards an important aspect of moral life. She

has talked about resentment and obligation. Both these have a phenomenology. And this is not the same as the phenomenology of a 'demand of formal rationality'. The phenomenology of understanding and conforming to a rational requirement seems to me quite different. The moral phenomenology is much closer to that articulated by (the atheist) Leonid Brezhnev to Jimmy Carter during the SALT II talks: "God will not forgive us if we fail".

Does the phenomenology of resentment and obligation at least partially constitute the moral phenomenology of an 'external demand' that we have previously identified? Can those of us who experience this phenomenology be satisfied that it is not necessarily misleading? I hope that these questions will be answered in the remainder of this paper.

Let us consider what the conditions are for such a demand to be appropriate. The experience that the demand is of "'external" origin and is directed at oneself' is only appropriate if there really is a demand of 'external' origin. If we cannot maintain belief in the "external" origin, then our phenomenal experience is in conflict with our considered belief.

There are various ways in which the 'external origin' may be questioned, for example:

- If its origin is thought to be 'in oneself' (e.g., expressivism, emotivism) then when this is appreciated the demand is either no longer experienced in this way, or at least a cognitive dissonance arises.
- If it is perceived to derive from societal pressures, then the demand is seen as contingent and hence either loses its force or its categorical 'oughtness'.
- If its origin is thought to be one's conscience, then either this is seen to be an apprehension of an independent, objective moral truth, or it can be debunked as a 'merely psychological' phenomenon (e.g., the superego).
- If it is contractual then it is based on prudential considerations, arising at root in self-interest, not from an external demand.

If we cease to believe in the reality of a demand of 'external' origin, what are we to make of our moral phenomenology? Can the phenomenology be sustained in the face of lack of belief?

The moral phenomenology is still an experience of a felt external demand, but our conviction is surely weakened by our understanding of the 'non-external' origin of that demand. If there is no external authority to the demand, the experience may not disappear, but we are likely to be less driven by it.

In general we need our descriptive and normative ethics and our metaethics to be consistent on pain of cognitive dissonance if not downright contradiction. If our metaethics is fictionalism or error theory, for example, how can we continue to assert our normative positions as demands, not just on us, but on others? If we are expressivists, can we accept that our moral imperatives are contingent upon the emotions we experience and at root simply arise in ourselves?

If we are looking for consistency between our metaethics and our experience of an external demand, three possible positions suggest themselves.

1. We bite the bullet and accept there is an objective moral reality which somehow presents an external demand;
2. We bite a different bullet, accept that there is no objective moral reality, and that the external demand is an illusion, thus rendering moral commitment and conviction, and its concomitant

motivation insecure. (Our commitments may amount just to strongly felt emotions.)

3. We recognise that we live within existing moral and ethical practices and try to incorporate our moral phenomenology within the resources available (with all the risks of motivated reasoning to justify retaining our capacity for moral commitment – we cannot, or will not, give up our moral commitments).

In this paper I explore how far we can get if we accept the third option.

I will begin by looking at demands that arise from our direct personal relationship with another person. Roberts⁷ discusses personal relationships (2013, p140-144) and claims they are constituted by emotions. His examples of kinds of personal relationship include: 'friendship, enmity, collegiality, marital love, marital strife, partnership, filiality, parenthood, and siblinghood' (p140). Contrary to superficial appearance he intends all these to be normative '... "collegial," ... for example, mean[s] characteristic of a good colleague...' (p140). He characterises '*a personal relationship [as] a disposition of both parties to think, act, and feel in ways characteristic of the (good or bad) relationship*' (p140 *Italics original*).

Using friends as an example, Roberts suggests that there cannot be 'an actual friendship without their ever having displayed episodes of thought, feeling, and action characteristic of friendship' (p141) and 'these episodes are ... constitutive of the friendship' (p141). He then claims that '[w]ithout the right emotions, neither the thoughts nor the actions would constitute a friendship'. Thus, the friendship is constituted by the (right) emotions.

This seems correct. A *personal* relationship is not simply a formal relation. Biological parents have a formal relation with their children without their necessarily having a personal relationship. The personal relationship of being a good mother, say, requires right emotion(s).

Roberts (2013) characterises friendship as involving episodes of 'felt awareness of such emotions as joy in the other's successes, delight in the other's presence, sadness over the other's pains and losses, and indignation at injustices perpetrated against the friend; and felt awareness on the part of the friend of these emotions in the other' (p141).

Although friendship at its best may involve episodes as described by Roberts, we may not always be at our best. We may become tired of too many success stories, experience moments of boredom, feel indifferent at some of our friends' perceived problems, and so on. But when we reflect, we realise these aberrations are just that – they do not conform to the general tenor of our relationship, we regret our lapses, and our friendship continues. Such personal relationships place demands from us for certain responses and standards of behaviour that are consonant with that kind of relationship.

Of course, friendships can sour as well as strengthen, and a settled continuation of unfriendly emotions signals that the relationship is no longer what it was. Personal relationships can grow or die.

Morality, as usually conceived, and as we are considering it here, extends beyond the realm of personal relationships. Personal relationships of the sort we have just discussed are mutual relationships, between us and specific people that we know. We may have other relationships with people, known or unknown, specific or otherwise, that are not so constituted. An example would be a contractual arrangement, put in place for prudential or instrumental purposes. A contract places a

⁷ (R. Roberts, *Emotions in the Moral Life*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013)

demand upon us, but such a demand may be legal, it may be a matter of personal honour (I keep my word), or it may be pragmatic (“if you scratch my back ...”).

Are there any relationships constituted by emotions between people simply in virtue of *being people*? Could there be a ‘moral relationship’ between people just because they are human beings?

There is almost certainly no argument that, as a matter of logic, can take us from outside to inside the moral world. But in reality we start from within a moral practice⁸. Williams⁹ (2000, p195) describes our belief ‘that, in some sense ... every human being ... deserves equal consideration’ as ‘*unhintergebar*’ (not directly translatable, but something like uncircumventable, ineluctable, ‘un-get-behind-able’). Korsgaard’s discussion of ‘resentment’ may not give us conclusive reason to behave morally, but it does indicate how we might start to fill out the moral landscape from a *minimal moral position* – that we think others have some kind of obligation not to hurt us gratuitously, and *vice versa* – a *demand* arising simply from seeing others as human beings. The phenomenology is of a demand, not, for example, a plea. Hence the significance of obligation-related emotion such as resentment and guilt. But it also reminds us what connects us as human beings – our feelings towards each other. Such emotions as remorse, contempt, compassion, love and sympathy are ‘other-involving’. It is these that embed us in our shared human condition. Within the emotional environment that we find ourselves we can then explore and develop – through discussion, imagination, reason and feelings.

Focusing on our existing moral practices, *within* them we have ways of judging what is kind, what is just, and so on. And these judgements are able to be assessed rationally.

We feel compelled to respond to the external demand in moral phenomenology in some way. And although the demand is something like a “sense of a vector-like force” (Horgan and Timmons (2008, 288)), it is not just a formless pressure for bodily movement. It is a pressure to do something. It has an intentional structure and presents the situation in a way that is rationally and emotionally assessable in terms of a fitting action, or range of actions, in response.

When discussing (an abstruse passage in) Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Larry Krasnoff¹⁰ writes: “[f]or a human agent, to pursue a desire [or other affective attitude] is not just to be pulled by a physical force”

“Rather, it is to make an intentional, at least potentially conscious judgment that the desire [affective attitude] is worth satisfying, and thus that the desired object [or outcome] is worth having. And to say that an object is worth having is not just to report on one’s own idiosyncratic state. Rather, it is to make a judgment that carries a claim to objectivity, and that is automatically open to rational assessment. To say that a thing is worth having [or doing] is not just to say that I want it, but also to say that *any similarly situated agent has good reason to pursue a similar object*” (Larry Krasnoff (2008), p98, *italics mine*).

This is making a normative claim: “the desiring agent implicitly invokes a reference to a *community of others*, a set of rational beings that would assent to the agent’s judgment of value” (Larry Krasnoff (2008), p98, *my italics*).

But my desire is not rational *per se*; it is rational when set in the context of an *emotionally structured* situation. My wish to help the person who has fallen on hard times is only rational in the context of a

⁸ We may wonder whether this includes sociopaths – but they are unlikely to be participating in this conversation at all.

⁹ B Williams, *Philosophy as a humanistic Discipline*, ed. A. W. Moore, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006

¹⁰ Larry Krasnoff, *Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit: An Introduction*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008)

background of concern for the well-being of others. Only if we share certain emotional responses can actions be assessed as rational or not.

We are made aware (see, for example, Haidt (2001)¹¹), that, in practice, much moral argument is an attempt to justify our actions to other people. Too frequently it is a *post hoc* attempt to rationalise our actions to other people. But this emphasises our psychological need to justify ourselves to others. And perhaps we can see the external demand partly as a pre-emption of the *post hoc* need to justify. But we also have a need to justify it to ourselves. We are also members of the community.

The 'external demand' can be thought of as a call to act from an actual or notional community of both others and ourselves, to which we respond with conscientious, reasoned action, on pain of censure, guilt and so on.

This is not the same as a strong notion of universalizability, in Kant's sense. There is no abstraction from the concrete conditions in which we find ourselves. We experience a response to a situation in which we find ourselves. The 'external demand' is in part a consequence of our moral assessment of the circumstances in which we find ourselves but is also a demand from a rational community for justified action, not in general but in particular. But we cannot, by reason alone, identify moral demands that have 'external' force to them; that require us to act in certain ways whether we like it or not. Their force arises from a complex of emotional responses: fear of censure, guilt compassion, and more.

So, in conclusion, I think that we can find some justification for accepting the appropriateness of the experience of an 'external demand' within a modest metaethics without suffering cognitive dissonance. I hope to have presented a plausible case that:

1. The moral demand need not merely originate in ourselves from our emotions, conscience or superego. We recognise ourselves as *answerable* to an external community.
2. The demand need not merely be to follow convention in our existing society. It is seen as a demand that requires our rational and emotional assessment of our situation.

¹¹ J. Haidt, 'The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail', *Psychological Review*, 2001. Vol. 108. No. 4, 814-834)